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A LIFE'S REMORSE

BY
THE DUCHESS.

AUTHOR OF "MOLLY BAWN," "MARVEL," "HON. MRS.
VEREKER," ETC., ETC. -

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A LIFE'S REMORSE.

PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

A SQUALID street, a dense crowd—swaying, angry, excited. All eyes seem fixed upon the door of one house, near which two policemen are standing, and from which every now and then men, evidently in authority, emerge. It is mid July, the 15th, and the glaring sun, though seen but dimly through the smoky London sky, is sending down its hot rays with such force that the air is terribly oppressive. Just here, in this dull side street, the heat is intolerable, yet nobody seems inclined to move on. Men, women and children stand watching the house with a morbid interest, talking loudly, unceasingly, and always with an undergrowl of hopeful rage in their tones.

Last night a crime of no ordinary sort had been committed here. Behind the guarded doors the body of the victim is still lying. There is nothing in the outside of the house suggestive of anything out of the common; it is indeed as meagre as its fellows, as innocent of paint or whitewash, as miserably unacquainted with cleansing of any sort, but inside, as is well known to the watching crowd, it widely differs from Nos. 7 and 11. This No. 9 is indeed a gambling hell of the distinctly better sort, which young men belonging to the aristocracy, and young men desirous of belonging to it, have seen fit to patronize occasionally in sheer idleness of spirit, and that vague longing to do the thing forbidden that is as the breath of life to us, and was born with our common mother, Eve.

Just now a red shadow seems to rest upon the house; the surging angry crowd see it only through a flush of crimson

that dyes it the colour of blood. The deep sunset is giving a helping hand to this ghastly fancy, and with wild gesticulation the roused populace of this unsavoury place (that yet is hardly a stone's-throw from fashionable quarters) converse together of last night's fatal occurrence.

To the mental vision, the form of the young girl lying in her shroud within that house of evil repute, is plain. She had been a very young girl, innocent of any connection with the gambling part of the concern; a daughter of one of the servants who attended there; a quite common girl, one of the people. There had been a raid upon the house, a hint had been given to the police; there had been a *mêlée*, a rush, and she, who had most unfortunately come there that night for the first time in her life to bring a message to her father—a message, said gossip, that ever delights to pile up the agony, about a dying brother—had been shot in the scuffle. She had been killed—by mistake, said some, but they were cried down upon; *malice prepense*, said others, and these had room given to them. She had been shot, and purposely, said the latter seers, having been suspected of treachery, and of having sold “them” to the police.

By “them” were meant the ordinary *habitués* of the place; but there had been present last night a large sprinkling of men from the more select portion of society—men whose reputation stood high in the social world, and who would have risked a good deal to keep their names out of the scandal that must ensue on their discovery in such a disreputable, if gilded hole.

Some had been arrested on the spot, but the greater number had, in the confusion of the moment, escaped. Those captured were of the baser metal, and to secure some whose names would ring through England was now felt by the police authorities to be the one thing worth living for. *That* would drag the affair into eminence. It would help effectually to put down this disgrace to civilization that stood within their midst.

The desire to arrest had been strong in the breast of the force at all times, but when the girl lay dead, shot to the heart upon the ground, with cards and dice strewn thick as leaves in Vallambrosa round her, with the blood rushing from her young bosom, and her father, regardless of all consequences, kneeling beside her, and calling aloud upon her name, a downright passionate thirst of blood broke out in

the myrmidons of the law, and they sought to lay hands heavily on all men with a view to seeing justice done.

The girl was well known; was popular. A pretty creature, prettier than ever now as she lay within her last coverings with that terrible, beautiful, ineffable smile upon her young lips. The populace, ever prone to excitement of one kind or another, had risen in a body, desirous if possible to avenge her murder—certain at all events to make a sensation of it. It is easy at most times to move the people. They will cry for the death of a puppy, if told in tones sufficiently lachrymose, and will laugh at the death of a kitten if the narrator gives it to them in any truly witty vein. At this moment their most savage instincts are awake, and they wait upon the comings and goings of the servants of the law as though their own lives depend upon them.

Last night was Saturday! And here is Sunday, a day well into the evening, and as yet no sure tidings of the real perpetrator of that fatal act has been gained. The people are growing impatient. They press more and more closely on the door as if drawn to the fatal spot by some horrible fascination.

The police have been making inquiries right and left, but nothing coming of them the crowd is losing patience. Detectives, with a hurried, subdued whisper to the policeman guarding the door, push their way through the masses and disappear into the by-streets at either side.

Suddenly, on the heels of one of these last, a tall man in official uniform steps into the dying sunlight. He is instantly recognized by the onlookers as one of those who last night had been most instrumental in arresting the visitors at the hell. He had had his face cut open in the affray, and now stands blinking in the light, with a huge white plaster drawn across his right cheek. The people watching him grow silent; he is standing on the top step of the flight that leads to the hall door of the ill-omened house, and is looking straight out before him as if lost in puzzled thought, a heavy frown upon his brow.

Suddenly this frown lightens, and his whole face springs into eager life. His eyes grow bright, intense, and fasten themselves with all the avidity of a beast of prey upon some object that stands back of the mass of human beings that are searching his face as though the desired knowledge for which they wait lies in it. He makes a step forward.

"That man! *Stop him!*" he cries in a clear ringing voice, extending his arm over the people to a direction that would lead to the left. Two or three people on the outskirts of the crowd turn, and know by a certain instinct that the slight, well-dressed, elegant-looking man behind them is the person held up to public scrutiny.

They have barely time to thus place their instincts, when the man, who is young and of a very agile build, and whose own instincts are apparently as acute as theirs, makes a movement to draw back from them. A fatal movement! In a second the crowd sways round—the attention of everyone present is directed towards him—another moment, and the policeman's hand is on his shoulder, and a dull roar, muffled as yet, but rich in promise of sterner things to come, sounds within his ears.

"You were here last night," says the man with the gash upon his face. "I saw you. I remember your face well."

"My good fellow, you are mistaken. If I *had* been here last night, do you think I should be here now?" says the gentleman in a wonderfully even tone, but in his rather forced smile there is fear.

"Most likely," says the policeman unmoved. "They're often like that. They comes back reglar. Come, you'd better give in; I'd swear to you at any moment, and we're wanting witnesses for this case."

"But I assure you," begins the other, always with that calm manner but that unmanageable smile, "that you are mistaken. I can prove an alibi——" he looks sharply from right to left. The people are crowding round him; with his elbow he instinctively pushes back a swarthy fellow who is pressing even closer. A quick hunted look grows within his eyes; escape seems impossible, and to be identified with this scandalous affair—to have his name dragged in—to——

It seems inevitable, however. With an inward groan he is about to acknowledge this, when a sudden well-known sound, as of the rapid approach of many horses, causes a panic in the crowd. At the lower end of the street a fire-engine comes into view; the horses tear up the street: the people give way. Seeing in a second his one chance of escape, the tall man dashes the policeman against the wall near him, and with a spring breaks through the crush and darts down a side lane.

CHAPTER II.

HE is round the corner in a moment, the yelling crowd after him. His sudden flight from justice has removed all doubts as to his guilt, and, smelling blood, the men, women, and children pursue him.

On, on, now nearing him, now distanced as the prey puts on a fresh courage, they follow him; he is now getting into a better part of the town, a solitary, half-asleep looking quarter, where the houses are more respectable, and shops fewer. He has turned a corner, with the sickening certainty that his breath is failing him, and that the hooting, hideous, revengeful pack behind are gaining on him.

For the moment he is out of sight; the friendly corner has hidden him. The street is utterly deserted so far as he can see, and as he glances with feverish eyes around him he becomes conscious of a hall door standing wide open. Mechanically he glances at it—10, Sandiford Street.

It is a last chance! Quick as lightning he springs inside the door; it is a sudden impulse, born of no thought, and may mean but the last movement in the luckless game.

He is spent, however, and it *is* a chance, however poor. He is up the steps, and into this quiet house that seems to have opened out to him arms of salvation.

He is only just in time; the yells of his pursuers tell him, as he stands panting in the tiny hall, that they are now in the street with him. Will they, or will they not, pass the door?

Turning a handle on his right, he enters a small room, tastily furnished, and evidently the apartment of some bookish person. It is empty. Once inside it, with no possibility of getting out again unseen, a sense of maddening despair falls upon him, and with lips so tightened that the teeth show between them, he stands a human thing at bay! Afterwards, he always told himself with a shuddering terror, yet a feeling of hope of absolution, that during those terrible moments of suspense he lost his brain, and was hardly to be considered accountable for anything he might have done.

Standing listening now in the empty little library, he waits on events, with pale face and brilliant eyes. Should it occur to one of those whooping idiots outside to do as

he did, to turn into the open doorway that has given him sanctuary—what then? All will be at an end. Publicity inevitable! Guiltless as he is of last night's mournful crime, he was yet one of the gambling party, and his name will assuredly be made much of, in the examination of this hateful affair; it will appear in public print. His name! Hitherto so immaculate! His very soul grinds within him!

As for the girl, that poor child, he had had nothing to do with her death—he thanked God for that. It was not likely that an English gentleman would go out in the evening armed with a revolver. Her death lay at the door of—well, some foreigner very likely. But he had been present; he had even been so unfortunate as to see the girl come into the room, and heard her scream as a chance shot hit her. It had been horrible—it had haunted him—it had drawn him back to this place to-day, and this lesser sensation, in which he is now figuring, seems a part, an outcome, of the whole. It is but natural that out of the great storm other winds should arise.

It is unlucky, however, that *he* should be the victim. He who has always held himself so chin-high above his brethren. What devil tempted him to go to that detestable hole last night? The world, *his* world, regards him as a Brutus, an honourable man indeed, and to be cast down from his high estate would be to him a catastrophe too bitter to be borne. Death rather than that—*anything!*

Yet if these fools find him, a most unenviable notoriety must assuredly be his—an even painful notoriety, in all possibility. The populace, incensed as they are, would think little of tearing him in pieces. An infuriated mob is a bad thing to face, and this mob is ripe for anything. Not that he shrinks from its vengeance, however rough. Better death than the disgraceful gossip that must ensue upon discovery.

Discovery! The very word opens out a new era to the man who up to this has been free of fear of any sort. A man to whom the breath of universal good opinion is as life itself. The man to whom even saintly people have given the hand of fellowship, and the *word*—which means a good deal more.

His gifts of charity have been large and various—so large, as to call for flattering comment from the press; and—to

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do him justice—were given in no grudging manner, and with no poor desire to attract the world's attention, but given heartily and because he honestly wished to give. There was no pettiness about him—no vicious tendency of any sort—nothing to which one would point an objecting hand—save, perhaps, a slight savagery of disposition, and that was so low-lying as to be unknown even to the man himself.

He draws a deep breath, and involuntarily takes a defensive attitude. The cries, the running feet, are at the door now; they pass. The pack in full cry is racing round the next corner, only a straggler or two following in its wake is to be heard. The danger, whatever it was, is at an end.

With his hand clutching one of the velvet curtains of the window, he glances cautiously out, to draw back again presently with a sigh of relief. The surging crowd is gone. The quiet street takes on its usual sabbatical calm. It is over. His name—so dear to him—need not now be connected with this hideous affair. There is no more to fear. A heavy breath of self-gratulation parts his lips. He draws himself up to his full height, and turning to make his way homewards finds himself face to face with another man.

A tall old man, bent, scholarly in appearance, with keen eyes that shine like stars in his withered face. A book-worm evidently; of venerable aspect, and of a sad countenance. A very old man, and one who had made long acquaintance with grief. His bright, strangely youthful eyes fix themselves upon the intruder, as if naturally to question the reason of his presence here, and having fixed themselves refuse to move, growing large indeed with comprehension half awake.

The latter, thus brought face to face with a fresh danger, collects himself sufficiently to stave off the exclamation that had been upon his lips, and turns a countenance ghastly indeed, but composed, upon the owner of the house. With necessity for composure has come the power to show it.

"I have to beg your pardon, sir," says he, advancing a step or two towards the old man. "There was a commotion in the street outside—some wretched criminal, I fancy, having been detected in the act of picking a pocket. The crowd was pursuing him, and I——" he pauses here, and presses his hand to his side. "My heart is weak. I dread

excitement of any kind. Finding your door open I ventured to come in and take refuge here, until," smiling, "the storm should be overpast. There is no further danger of a jostling, I think, so," with a courteous bow, "I will rid you of an uninvited guest."

He makes another step forward, this time towards the door. But the old man, making a movement that checks his progress, holds out a threatening hand.

"A moment, sir," says he. "I was myself one of the crowd you speak of. I saw the 'wretched criminal'—I saw him sufficiently well," with a piercing glance, "to know that it was *you*."

"Stand back," says the younger man with a sudden fierceness.

"I refuse to let you stir until this matter is investigated," cries the other in shrill tones. "There shall be justice, sir, justice! The death of that young girl shall not go un-avenged——"

"Stand back, I say," repeats the younger man in low dangerous tones.

"Stand back *you*, sir. Any one connected with last night's infamous murder must be——"

He stops here with a thick gurgle, for the other's hand is on his throat. With a savage grasp that kills the cry that would have risen, he presses back the old man till he has him on his knees, and then upon his back, and then with a fierce passion he dashes the white head, once, twice, thrice, with horrible force against the floor.

CHAPTER III.

It might have been the work of half an hour, or half a minute. The younger man, rising, scarce knows which it is. He looks stealthily down upon his work. Hah! At least the old fool is still; his tongue wags no more. It will take him time to recover consciousness—precious time, that will enable *him*, the assaulter, to escape. And what is an hour's relief from the worries of existence? Why nothing—a matter to be grateful for, no more. A deeper, sweeter sleep, because dreamless.

There is no movement in the shrunken body. He has

fainted. How like a faint is to——. When people faint they are always pale; pale as——. Well, it was a pity he should have compelled him to faint, but it was the old man's own fault. He *would* have it—and——. Great heaven! What horrid thing is that?—that dark, dark, *red* spot, coming from under the nostril and trailing slowly down—slowly—slowly——

Stop it, some one! *stop it!* or it will enter the white, parted lips. Oh——!

He turns, and flies the room. Outside there is still a straggler or two rushing past, and joining in with them he runs too. These last are newcomers in the race, to whom his features are unfamiliar, and he runs with them in all safety, being indeed accepted by them as an ardent hankerer after justice.

And as he runs, he feels a certain joy in the quick movement, the swift rushing through the air! The very wings of Mercury seem lent to him. He seems to fly upon the wind. So fast he goes that he outstrips his companions, and carried away by this mad new spirit that possesses him, is in danger of coming up with those first enemies who would know him and decry him.

On a sudden he recollects that, pulls himself up abruptly, and taking advantage of a moment that leaves him free of suspicion, darts down a side street, and still runs, until the sound of his own footsteps without accompaniment frightens him, and brings him to a standstill before comment has been brought to bear upon him.

Another dingily respectable street, apparently bereft of life. The London Sunday street is, as a rule, dead. Just now this absence of things coming and going is a relief to the man. He stops short and looks back over his shoulder. Already the detestable idea of being followed has become part of him. Furtively he wipes his brow, and this lifting of his arm sends a sharp thrill of pain through his body. He pauses, looks mechanically upon the arm that pains him, and as memory grows riper a sweat of terror replaces that other damp he has just brushed from his forehead. *He must have used force with that old man!*

Such a frail old man! He remembers him now. Bent, feeble, yet vigilant. Vigilant, smiling and full of life; hard to kill. Good heavens! to kill!—yes, with that look of vitality in the quick eyes one *could* not kill him unless one

resorted to extreme violence, unless, indeed, one ~~would~~ *would* be—a murderer!

Oh!

But what is the matter with this arm? a wrench, no doubt, in getting through the crowd—in that conflict with the policeman, say. It certainly had nothing to do with the old man. Oh—*damn* that old man! Why should he have come in his way!

He stands, a little dazed, yet sufficiently alive to consequences to make it clear to him that he must pretend to see something. A sweet shop, with shutters half up, does his purpose, and here he pauses, studying with unseeing eyes the dirty lemon drops and attenuated sugar-sticks, and generally consumptive lollipops that adorn the melancholy windows. As he thus stands he mechanically rubs his hand down the arm that hurts him, and presently becomes conscious that his fingers are moist. Mechanically, too, he looks at them.

Oh, kind, forgiving God! Not blood! not *blood*. He had been unkind, cowardly, cruel, but——. A horrible damp bedews his brow. *This* blood must have come from that old man. But from where—his head perchance. There had been no sign of blood upon him, save that small sickening drop that fell from his nostril downwards.

Well, what of it! He pushes the stained hand out of sight, and rubs it in a shuddering, secret fashion against his coat. The simplest thing in the world will bring blood sometimes. He had not seriously hurt that old man—only stunned him; it was for self-preservation, and doubtless even by this time the old fellow was on his feet again, and organizing a search party to arrest him. He laughs aloud as he thinks of this. Oh, yes, he will forgive him that search party—that natural desire for revenge. He will forgive him anything, if only——. A thick, painful sob chokes him.

* * * * *

It is next morning, the 16th of July. Through the half-closed windows the sun is shining into a library, an exquisitely-appointed room, very different to that small, scantily-furnished apartment where an old man had lain prone; upon one of the tables a daily paper is spread wide, and bending over it is a human creature, from whose mental misery and despair let us all pray to be delivered.

One paragraph has riveted his attention. As he reads

and re-reads it, his every hope in life lies dead—slain, as surely as that old man was.

“Terrible Tragedy !” The letters dance before his eyes, then grow into a sullen red colour, then fade, then change back again to a large and vivid black. There is no escaping them.

Yet, suggestive as they are of cruel harm done to some man or woman, they would have had no weight with the man now staring at them with dull, hopeless eyes, but for certain other words lying below them. These last, indeed, had been the first to catch his eye. A sleepless night, an unacknowledged dread, had driven him downstairs early—had compelled him, though already he feared comment, to demand the morning papers before the hour usual for the butler to deliver them. And when they were once within his hands, as they are here now, tearing open the *Times*, he scanned its columns with an awful tightening at his heart—“*10, Sandiford Street.*”

Now that he really knows, he feels as if he had known it for a long, long time. A century it might be. *Could it be only yesterday?*

“Oh, merciful Lord ! to Whom life belongs, Who can give and take it—*must* this thing be ! Oh, that a miracle might take place ! Create one, Lord ; and let that old man arise and walk the earth, as he walked it only a few short hours ago.”

This man, his slayer, praying now as he had never prayed before, stops short here, and flings up his arms heavenwards, as if sudden conviction of the futility of it all has struck with the sharpness of a keen strong blade into his heart.

It is too late. The voice of Heaven has spoken ; there is no appeal. Henceforth he is accursed.

Again, as though compelled to it, he reads the fatal words beneath him, though were he to live a thousand years he could not forget them, so burned into his brain they are. “This last tragedy took place very close to the scene of the shocking murder on Saturday night, at that famous, or rather infamous, gambling hell in —— Street.”

He beats his hand fiercely on the paper here, and his horrified eyes grow bright with a sort of rage, that cries aloud upon his folly. In seeking to escape the world’s censure on a minor fault, he had fallen into an abyss from which no man can pluck him.

"An old gentleman, a Mr. Darling, quiet, respectable, and much thought of by his neighbours—so thoroughly inoffensive in all his ways that a motive for the murder is impossible to find. The case is rendered even more difficult by the fact that a desire to rob had evidently nothing to do with it—the murdered man's watch, chain and seals being found upon his body, and some loose coins in his pockets. It appears the servant was out, and had left the hall door wide open whilst she went on her errand. The murderer must have entered by it, and finding the old man alone perpetrated his dastardly crime. It is remarkable that two such fearful assassinations should have been committed within a few hours of each other, and points to the clear idea that one crime suggests another, and that the thirst for blood, like a disease, is catching. The police have made every inquiry, but as yet there is no clue to the murderer."

"No clue to the murderer!" Through all his despair his eyes cling to those last words. It is characteristic of the man that, in spite of the real agony he is enduring, no thought of voluntarily surrendering himself to justice finds room. That dread of public opinion—that shrinking from public censure—that has been part of his life ever since he was cognizant of anything, is strong as ever within him now, and in the very centre of his *discomfort* he finds comfort in the thought that no possible opening for discovery lies anywhere. He had gone in and out of that house unobserved. His conscience alone had accompanied him as he entered and left it—a most sorry companion too, and one not to be silenced. Yet he is safe. In the very depth of his remorse and misery he sees that.

END OF PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

"DEAREST MARIAN,

"You know I hate writing letters unless I have something to put in them, but now I *have* something, so I sit down to scribble to you. The fact is, I must tell it to somebody or die. *Such* an adventure! When one thinks of the beautiful monotony in which we always live, one must acknowledge that anything so out of the common as befell us yesterday is to be regarded as a pure godsend. Well, introductions over, facts lie before you. You know of course that big house on the top of Maiden Hill that has been untenanted for so long, don't you?—and that of late the owner of it has threatened to put in an appearance and destroy the pleasure of a great many of us who loved to roam his woods at will? Well, he has come, and the way we found it out was—*murderous*!

"Still believing the pretty woods ownerless, the colonel and I set out for our usual midday walk through them, the dear old man declaring he would like to take a last bit of good out of them. You will understand that with the advent of a master at The Grange our wanderings through the woods would be at an end. That would be inevitable.

"Pushing my arm through his, therefore, I went afield, thinking of nothing more out of the everyday run of things than that perhaps we might meet an early dog-rose, or a late primrose, or a rabbit, or——

"I pause here to make the rabbit famous, because he did come, and in coming nearly blew us into bits. Bad little, *good* little rabbit! He *didn't* kill us, you see, and he has given us what would seem a very interesting acquaintance.

"Well, here is the rabbit rushing out of the copse on our left, and—piff—bang—off goes something, and here now is the poor bunny lying dead at our feet. Could tragedy farther go?

"It could, I can tell you, for if that shot that slew him had been just a trifle more to the right I don't think I should have been able to scrawl this letter to you now. You see I was walking just a *little* in advance of the colonel, and it would have caught *me*. It *was* a chance! Right across our noses went the shot. You know the colonel's way when angry; well,

he was fairly started now. He picked up the rabbit without a glance to left or right.

"‘We may as well carry home our baggage,’ said he, speaking as cool as you please, to conceal the fright he had got, for it *was* a shock, I can tell you; and I myself was ‘all of a thrimble,’ as old Betty would say.

"‘At this instant—(quite the *right* instant, now, isn’t it? I always will say, he *couldn’t* have staged it better)—a man came through the bushes into the foreground—white as death. It *wasn’t* chalk; it was nature. His gun was in his hand. Plainly, *the culprit!*

"‘Oh you are safe—you are not hurt?’ cried he, as though the words were shot out of his mouth as sharply as that last discharge out of his gun.

"‘And here the colonel grew tremendous.

"‘Good heavens, sir!’ roared he; ‘what do you mean by firing upon the passers-by?’

"‘You are uninjured?’ said the scapegrace, in a breathless way. It was all the apology offered so far.

"‘No thanks to *you*,’ roared the dear colonel once again. ‘One would think the taking of human life was a mere pastime to you. Why you’ll probably turn out a murderer, sir, if you persist in your present ways. Call *that* sport!’

"‘It was really too bad of the colonel; the poor man turned a lively green; you could hardly imagine anything more horribly crushed than he appeared. Flat all through. I felt dreadfully sorry for him, because of course he hadn’t meant it. If he had been a real murderer, he could hardly have looked more conscience-stricken—there came a look into his eyes that quite frightened me. I nudged the colonel, who was beginning a second tirade, and at that ungentle reminder he consented to draw breath a bit.

"‘I beg your pardon,’ said the new-comer—his voice was quite a mumble, you never saw a man so frightened. ‘I can hardly hope for forgiveness. When I saw you the fraction of a second after my gun was discharged I thought——’ he paused here, and I turned my glance more fully on him. And indeed as I looked I thought to myself that in all probability we should have to carry home not only bunny but his slayer. I tugged at the colonel’s arm to make *him* look as well, and gave him to understand in a very clever whisper that if he continued to abuse this poor man any

longer *he* would be a murderer, but he was too far gone to be led into any reasonable path.

“‘So you ought, sir, so you ought,’ said he unrelentingly, and with terrible severity, though he certainly didn’t know what the stranger had meant, as the poor man had not finished his sentence. ‘Why, your confounded gun went off within an inch of my nose.’

“‘And no mean target too!’ whispered I into his ear, which set him off at once. You know the colonel’s darling nose—what a Wellingtonian it is; and how prone he is to give way to mirth at the most untimely seasons. He now began to snigger.

“‘I *can’t* explain how sorry I am,’ said ‘*the man*.’ (He *must* be put in like this if one is to understand him, because a thing without a name is a puzzlement to the most abstruse.) ‘It is no compensation, I know, but when I had fired I thought I should have fainted.’

“The colonel, who was still sniggering at my inane remark, failing to catch fire at this last apology, I took courage in both hands (they are small, if sunburnt, if you will remember), and glancing behind his back at the culprit I gave him a grimace, meant as encouragement. Whoever he was, however guilty—and he certainly did look like a poacher in those leggings—in all conscience he had now been scolded enough.

“‘You needn’t go *on* fainting,’ said I, seeing that he was still very low down in the world. ‘We are all here—none of us dead; not so much as a *hair* of us blown into space!’

“And here I confess I gave way to laughter of the convulsed noiseless sort. It wouldn’t have done to rouse the colonel. “The man” looked back at me. It was as though I had given him a reprieve. He regarded me with a gratitude that was certainly far beyond my deserts.

“The colonel by this time having had his snigger out, now felt better towards man and beast.

“‘Tell you what, sir,’ said he, ‘you gave me a shock that is hard to forgive. My niece here,’ indicating me, ‘would have been a loss impossible to replace.’

“I thought this very handsome of the colonel, but refrained from the expected confusion. I sustained myself as though I really did believe the sun would stand still at my demise.

“‘I can well believe that,’ said the unknown, with *so much*

emphasis that I understood at once that in an ordinary tale it would be acknowledged that he had fallen in love with me. I felt the plot thickening. To be the ideal of an out-and-out poacher is, I suppose, quite as much as even the modern maid can aspire to. I knew I ought to be grateful, so I tried to look it. But, unfortunately, I could only look it at the colonel. Really, one can't be ready all in a moment to look sweet things at a poacher.

"‘However,’ went on the colonel magnanimously, ‘I can afford to forgive you, as you won’t be able to do it again. The owner of these woods is expected here shortly, and I suppose he will see that his—er—people—er—guests can handle a gun.’

"‘Evidently my uncle was uncertain as to whether the man with the gun was a servant or a guest. As for me I had no doubt he was a poacher; but I thought if I told the colonel so he might come to loggerheads with him, and a real murder might be perpetrated. As the colonel spoke the man looked down. I was right, then. He was abashed.

"‘I am the owner,’ said he in a low tone.

"‘Well, what do you expect happened then? We didn’t go through the ground, anyway. I don’t know what the colonel did—I never shall know—because I burst into an idiotic peal of laughter that *ought* to have made the welkin ring if it didn’t. It was *too* funny. When I recovered, uncle was looking a little stiff, but was letting his hand be grasped by the embryo murderer, which showed signs of grace in both surely. When one thought of all the colonel had said, and his allusion to the fact that the owner of the woods would be sure to dismiss the owner of them, I confess it seemed to me too good to be true. *Such* a little comedy! We parted from him, I scarcely know how, and returned to our home.

"‘Perhaps I ought to have asked him to dinner,’ said the colonel, hesitating on the last step.

"‘Perhaps you oughtn’t,’ said I, with fine scorn.

"‘But so inhospitable,’ muttered the colonel.

"‘We’re not in Ireland now,’ said I; ‘so that though you *have* insulted a man, you need not ask him to dinner.’ At this the colonel turned blue.

"‘D’ye *think* I insulted him?’ said he.

"‘You as good as told him he was a duffer with a gun, at all events,’ said I.

"Well, so he was—so he was!" cried my darling colonel, with so fresh and so hearty a contempt once more, that even though we were now upon the high road I turned and hugged him.

"Well, that is all. But it *was* an adventure, wasn't it? Certainly our first meeting with Mr. Crawford, the new man—the next-door neighbour—was full of life.

"I suppose you want to know something of the 'deserted village' (it is always deserted when *you* go away). 'Stands Scotland where it did?' you would say. (Fenton-by-Sea wouldn't scan, or I'd have put it in). It does anyway; there has not been the slightest change since you left us, six months ago. The usual visiting is kept up; no two families have fallen apart, each from each; the internecine warfare between Lady Stamer and Mrs. Vaudrey has been faithfully kept up; last week indeed it raged. When I say that the combatants came not to blows, but to letters, you will understand that the affair was serious indeed. And all about the clothing club, so far as I can gather. Isn't it silly? Mrs. Vaudrey came to auntie, and told her all about it; *such* a tale! It took two hours and a half, and the colonel swearing all the time in the back room, because the early dinner was *on* and she—Mrs. Vaudrey—wouldn't be off. Good heavens! Who creates such women as *her*?

"And yet I'd rather have her than that *horrid* Lady Stamer.

"Well, she kept on hammering the whole quarrel into poor auntie's head, who you know is incapable of understanding anything unamiable.

"Lady Stamer didn't know herself,' was one of the remarks that ran all through the long recital of her wrongs. I must tell you I was present all through the interview, because I knew poor auntie would have died if she had been left alone—and what a grief to the colonel and all of us!

"Lady Stamer was mistaken if she thought she could ride rough shod over the county;' this was an echo to the first start. 'She, Lady Stamer, might be a baronet's wife, but *SHE* (double dashed), Mrs. Vaudrey, was a baron's daughter, and entitled to an Hon. before her name? And so on, *ad nauseam*. Isn't it queer? And yet you know I can't help sympathizing with Mrs. Vaudrey, just because I can't bear Lady Stamer! *That's* queer too!

"The latter is in an awful mood just now, though the beloved son, Sir Bertram, is at home. Perhaps his charms cannot kill the *ennui* that always ensues on the advent of the unbeloved one. Yes—Eaton Stamer is at home too.

"And I wish *you* were. Hurry back, like the best of girls that you are. I miss you very much, though indeed a good part of my time is taken up training a little new pony that the colonel has given to Jimmy. How he *does* love that eldest boy of his! How he loves all the world!

"Ever your loving

"EVELYN D'ARCY."

CHAPTER II.

LAST night was wet, to-day is lovely. In the darkness, when all had slept, the rushing beating rain had descended with eager joy upon the unresisting land, and deluged it. It is still early in the summer. We are not, as yet at all events, half way through it; June is still young—a very babe.

A perfect torrent of sunshine is falling on the old house, smothered in ivy as it is. The leaves glisten and sparkle and really quite preen themselves beneath its rays. It is evident that they like such ardent courting.

That it is an old house, and loved, though ill-kept because of want of means to keep it better, may be read by all who run. The sashes of the many windows are sadly in want of painting; the walls would be the better of a thorough washing—wherever the ivy, that in kindly friendship has covered their deficiencies, is not, they show themselves unmistakably dingy.

But the sunshine riots over all. It gilds the lovely and the unlovely alike. It covers this English home of this Irish Colonel D'Arcy with as much glory as it gives to the palatial residence, little used, of the Duchess of Carminster, that stands on a high hill to the left of Firgrove, the name by which the modest mansion of the D'Arcys goes. It had been so called when the colonel took it and he left it so, though to tell the truth there isn't a fir-tree within a mile of it. There are others as good, perhaps, or better—beeches and oaks and elms, but of even a paltry spruce it is innocent.

Down below, in the field at the eastern end of the house, a scene is being enacted that is rather out of place when one thinks of the terrible heat of the day. It is so warm indeed, that people of mature years creep into darkened rooms, and seek couches, and betake themselves to the last novel, and generally efface themselves until the hour comes when afternoon tea is here and the intrusive sun is not.

But to the very young, heat and cold are alike. They feel them but fail to classify them; they decline to abate one moment's ardour because of them. And thus it comes to pass that Evelyn D'Arcy, in a gown of the very oldest, and with half her lovely hair unbound and with the other half coiled on the top of her shapely head in orthodox fashion, is to be seen pursuing a rough little pony—youthful as herself, if one arranges the different terms of life honestly—round and round a grass field under the rays of a tropical sun.

In this delightful occupation she is helped by a boy cousin some four years younger than herself. Jimmy D'Arcy is indeed only thirteen, but an excellent assistant for all that. Excellent as he is, however, the pony is one too many for him; just as the little lad has cleverly driven him into a corner, with many a shout, and much uplifting of the arms, and threats and coaxings mixed, the merry little brute turns swiftly round, kicks up his unshod heels, and is off to the opposite side of the field before you could say Jack Robinson.

"Oh, Jimmy, what a *fool* you are!" cries Miss D'Arcy, rushing up breathless. "Why, there he was, under your very nose, and you let him go. You'll never get such an opportunity again. His mane was in your fingers. Oh! what a useless, *useless* creature is a boy!"

"Well, I don't want to be kicked if *you* do," says Jimmy candidly. "Did you watch his hind legs—did you ever see anything like them? Round and round they went like a windmill. I don't believe any pony kicks like him. No one could be up to him. Now, Evelyn," excitedly, "here he is again. Now, be careful—I——"

But words are lost on Evelyn. She is once more off in wild pursuit of the refractory pony. Away goes the pony, its uncombed mane flying in the wind; away goes she, her pretty soft love-locks, that should lie decorously above her forehead, flying wildly too. This is the only analogy be

tween them, as the pony is a stout sturdy little animal, with a thick neck, a restless eye, and at this present moment a plain determination to defy the world.

Evelyn looks as if she could defy the world too, in right of her beauty. She is a little thing, slender, dark-eyed, clear-skinned, with nut-brown hair, and lips as red as roses. A beautiful child—but as yet a child only, although she is quite seventeen. Her hair falls in light natural waves above her white brow. Her hands and feet are models; even the rough shoes that cover the latter cannot hide this fact.

Her eyes are peculiar—very large, and at times earnest—but deep and restless and sometimes mischievous. Brilliant eyes, that can be dreamy, angry, merry, gentle as the moment demands. There is something about her that suggests the idea of perpetual motion. An untamable creature hard to catch—as hard to catch as the wild little untrained thing she is now pursuing with a foot as light as Atalanta's.

Jimmy follows, his heart in his mouth. He is a well-built lad and a handsome too, as all the D'Arcys are, with eyes afire with eager desire for conquest, and a mouth sweet and happy.

"Now, Evelyn—*now!*" he roars, racing up, but Evelyn has seen her opportunity as well as he. Rushing in upon the pony she seizes his mane, and with an angry word or two to him—who knows her well—she reduces him to a certain propriety of demeanour. He consents, at all events, to stand still whilst meditating a fresh act of insubordination.

"Oh, you have him," cried Jimmy radiant, coming up and helping to slip a bridle over the captive's head. "Isn't he a beauty! And to think he is all my own. Say, Evelyn, isn't it good of father to give him to me?"

"You're in luck, certainly," says Evelyn, who is stroking the pony's nose, and whispering little loving words to it, that are received by the pony with a calm contempt.

"It's the best luck I ever had. I've always so longed for a pony, and now I have it. And father might have sold him, you know, and got money for him——"

"And money is a rather unknown quantity here."

"Yes. That's it. Perhaps," says the boy with a rather wistful look, "I oughtn't to take him."

"Oh, yes, you must. The colonel means you to have him. He's been arranging about it ever since last January. It is your birthday gift. It would trouble him now if you said anything."

"Well, I won't!" plainly relieved. "But he *is* good, anyway."

"The colonel's an angel," says Miss D'Arcy with calm conviction. "There isn't any one like him alive."

"Sometimes," says the boy, looking at her over the pony's shoulder. "Don't you wish he was *your* father?"

Evelyn laughs.

"I don't see what difference it would make," says she. "If he were ten times my father I couldn't love him more, or he, me. And besides, do you know, Jim," growing suddenly grave, "I wouldn't give up the memory of my real old father for a good deal."

"Well, just so," says Jimmy vaguely.

"I wish we had a saddle," says Miss D'Arcy regarding the pony with a careful eye. "I could do without it, of course, but still a saddle is training."

"I'll run up to the stables for one."

"No. It is too far, and he might give me the slip again. I'll try him as he is. Here, hold his head; keep your hand on his nose—*so*. And I'll make a jump for it when his head is turned the other way. Now, steady!"

In a second she has vaulted on to the pony's back and with the quickness of practice has the reins well in hand.

"Let go," cries ~~she~~ sharply, and Jimmy, relaxing his hold on the reins, away flies the pony like a mad thing, Miss D'Arcy clinging to him like a limpet. Round and round the field they go, victory on neither side, until at last chance gives the pony the upper hand. Swerving against a post in the railings he recoils heavily, flinging his rider to the ground.

"Great heaven! She is hurt," cries a voice from the other side of the railings. The voice is followed by a face, white and disturbed, that rising from the drop into the field beneath, where the mad struggle could be seen from afar, now becomes level with the scene of action. Driven by his anxiety, he mounts the ha-ha as swiftly as a boy. He is not so swift, however, that he cannot be outdone. A younger, slighter man, springing over the wall upon his left, rushes towards Evelyn, and—

CHAPTER III.

"I'm all right. What a fuss about nothing!" says she, springing nimbly to her feet, and speaking with a rather petulant air. No one likes to be commiserated on a fall from a horse, and this being a pony the sympathy is even more objectionable. "Why, what did you think? That I was dead?"

"God forbid," says the young man, lightly enough, yet with something underneath that turns the careless rejoinder into a thanksgiving.

By this time the man who had so laboriously overcome the difficulties of the ha-ha, now comes into view, and resolves himself into Mr. Crawford.

"What! Two witnesses to my overthrow," cries the girl, a hot flush mounting to her brow. "Oh, this is too bad. But I do assure you, Mr. Crawford, that as a rule, few horses can overcome me. By the by," with a rapid glance from one man to the other, "I suppose you are as yet strangers to each other. Let me introduce you. Mr. Crawford—Captain Stamer Eaton; this is our new neighbour."

"Terribly new, I'm afraid," says Mr. Crawford with his slow smile, that moves as unwillingly as if it had been out of use and unoiled for many a year. As it stands, however, there is a certain fascination in it, born of its melancholy. Nevertheless it fails to attract Eaton Stamer, who acknowledges the other's salute very coldly.

"There is something appalling about being the last newcomer," goes on Mr. Crawford, with that unwilling smile of his, that is now distinctly propitiatory. "One hardly knows where to tread. One knows nothing; and one has got to find out all about one's neighbours without any help."

"And your neighbours have got to find out all about you," says Captain Stamer indifferently.

There is a second's—*just* a second's—pause, and then——

"True!" says Crawford slowly, with a gracious inclination of his head, as if in acknowledgment of the truth of the other man's idle remark.

"Well, I expect we'll find it out quick enough," says Evelyn gaily. "Nothing escapes *this* country; and if it did it would be snapped up by——"

She cuts herself off short and colours vividly, and gives an apologetic glance to Stamer.

"I forgive you," says he in a low tone and with a laugh, "though these allusions to my mother are of course painful."

At this Miss D'Arcy laughs a little too, and as Jimmy has now come up to them, pony in hand, a turn is given to the conversation.

"Take off the bridle, Jimmy; we shan't want it again now," says she with an ill-suppressed sigh of disappointment.

"And a very good thing too," says Stamer stoutly, deaf to her regret.

Mr. Crawford, however, is not so case-hardened.

"We are in your way," he says. "And yet, is it safe for you to ride such an untrained little brute as that?"

"Why, a fall from *him* wouldn't hurt a kitten," says Miss D'Arcy. "You should see me sometimes when I've got a colt in hand. Why——"

"I don't want to," says Mr. Crawford quickly. *So* quickly, and with such evident meaning in his tone, that Eaton Stamer turns a sharp eye on him. Had *fear* been expressed in it, or what?

Evelyn too has noticed the strangeness of the tone and has laid her own constructions on it. He thinks her unfeminine, wild, ungente. A hot burning flush mounts to her forehead; Stamer, looking at her by chance, sees it.

"Miss D'Arcy rides beautifully. She is quite fearless, and can manage most things," he says in a studied tone. "For myself, I like a woman who can ride."

"Oh! Eaton," cries Miss D'Arcy, as if startled out of herself by this bold declaration, "why, only last week you told me——" she stops quite suddenly here as if puzzled by a glance he has cast at her. He laughs, more for Mr. Crawford's edification than through genuine mirth.

"Well, what did I tell you?" asks he; and then quietly, "You have taken the Grange, I hear, Mr. Crawford? Good house, fine view. Best bit of cover in the neighbourhood."

"I think I shall like the place," says Crawford in his slow way, that seems to have been acquired, rather than born with him. "Though," with a glance at Miss D'Arcy, who is now walking very demurely beside them, "my first day here was hardly a propitious one. I very nearly shot Miss D'Arcy."

"*What?*" says Stamer.

"Yes." In a few words he tells the story. "I came down here to-day, Miss D'Arcy, to apologize to you and your father for my unpardonable carelessness."

"To my uncle," says Evelyn, correcting him. "But it was no such great matter after all. Nothing happened. We had not even the good luck to get a grain. *Then* one might have posed indeed as killed and wounded! But as it was——"

"I could not sleep last night through thinking of it. It was such a mere chance. One step more and—it might have been terrible," says Mr. Crawford with feeling.

"That word *might*, applies to so many things. Well, you haven't killed me, so be happy. I shall never forget your face," says she, giving way to uncheckable mirth. "It was ghastly. Had my corpse been lying in your path you could not have looked more confounded." She turned her eyes to his. "You would make a bad murderer," says she gaily. "You would be found out at once, your face would betray you."

His face now at all events is a study. She has described it as being ghastly on their last meeting, when his careless shot had been so nearly fatal; but its hue was healthy then to what it now is. After a moment he rallies, his colour creeps slowly back into his face, but his smile is still fixed and singularly unpleasant as he answers her.

"A good thing," he says. "Better be found out at once, than live a life of secret horror."

"You speak with feeling," says Captain Stamer laughingly. "Had you a friend who 'made away' with anybody? That's the correct phrase, isn't it?"

"Oh! there's the colonel," cries Evelyn quickly. A figure on their right can now indeed be seen, making a vigorous but futile effort to hide himself within the shrubberies. "Colonel! *Colonel!* Don't go! We can all see you; and you look twice as lovely in that old coat as in your Sunday-go-to-meeting one. Come back. Here is only Eaton and Mr. Crawford."

The colonel, with a rather shame-faced smile and a coat very considerably the worse for wear, but a cherished old coat for all that, and an unspeakable comfort to its owner, veers round and advances on them.

He is a tall man in the prime of life still, though he has passed his fiftieth year, with a remarkably handsome face

and a grand carriage, and in spite of his shabby surroundings, "gentleman" written all over him. His eyes are as bright as if he was only fifteen, and his mouth is the image of Jimmy's. It would occur to the intelligent observer that the colonel and Time will have a tussle before the latter gains the day. It is certain that the colonel will find a real difficulty in growing old.

"Glad to see you—glad to see you," says he, shaking hands first with Crawford and afterwards with Stamer. "Warm day! I thought I saw ladies in your train, and—er—old coat, don't you know. Meant to cut round by the shrubbery into the house and put on some fresh toggery, but Evelyn circumvented me; she generally *does*, ha ha. You'll excuse me, I hope," turning to Crawford; "I was gardening, putting down fresh row of peas—rats ate the last row."

"I really do think, colonel, it is disgraceful in a man of your age to be so given over to vanity," says his niece, tucking her arm into his. "The fact is, that you think you look beautiful always, and yet you must pretend that you don't. So *false*! I left Jimmy with the pony. I hope they won't both come to grief."

"Not they," says the colonel, who is of that happy sort who never see breakers ahead. "Why, here he is. How's the pony, Jim?"

"A darling!" says Jimmy, which is hardly an answer. "Oh! dad, I do *love* you for giving him to me. Say, Eaton, isn't he a beauty?"

The group has got divided now, and the colonel with Mr. Crawford are walking on in front.

"You must come in for a bit and have something," says the colonel. "It's an awful hot day. Mrs. D'Arcy will be delighted to see you. She—ha ha—she has come to look upon you by this time as Evelyn's preserver. As you *didn't* shoot her, you see, you saved her life." Here the colonel laughs again, a mellow laugh that does one's heart good only to hear.

"I shall be very pleased to make Mrs. D'Arcy's acquaintance," says Crawford. "She is very good to take it in that way." He pauses a moment and then goes on. "Your niece—is English?" he asks.

"Not she!" says the colonel stoutly, knocking the ash off his cigar in a rather offended sort of way. "How could

you think that? Not at all," more broadly; "her mother was my sister, Irish to the backbone, and her father's mother was Irish too. She took from them all the blood she has. 'There isn't,' with triumph, "an English ounce in her."

"Ah!" says Mr. Crawford, "yes; one should have known, of course." Her mother, D'Arcy's sister. But what was the father's name? The father's mother had been Irish too. Probably they were cousins all through. The Irish are fond of intermarrying. Of course D'Arcy was her name—they called her so.

CHAPTER IV.

By this time they have reached the house, and entering it by a hall-door that would be very much the better of a coat of paint, are shown by the colonel into a large and shady room upon their left.

It is about as curious a room as one could imagine, made up of all sorts of incongruities so far as the furniture is concerned, and yet it is a distinctly pretty room. From the girl's careless beauty and her open unconcern about her dress, which is so ancient as to be at its last gasp—from the evident shabbiness of the colonel, Crawford, at all events, had been prepared for a drawing-room untidy to the last degree.

Yet this room is charming in its own moneyless fashion. The chairs, if so old as to be almost worthless, still belong to the class that are found only in good houses. The elderly curtains are nicely draped. Great care has been taken with the arrangement of the few small tables. There are no antimacassars and, above all things, flowers reign everywhere; there is a very profusion of them, all exquisitely settled in their bowls. Through the lowered blinds a brilliant twilight seems to cover this strange old room that is a veritable surprise to Crawford, seeing it for the first time.

"What roses!" says he, bending over a delicate bunch near him. "And how well contrasted. Your work?" to Evelyn, who is standing beside him trying to make tidy her shapely head. She has both arms uplifted in order to do

this and continues the occupation whilst smiling a consent to him.

"Yes, mine. I always arrange the flowers. But the roses belong to the colonel. Roses love the colonel. He has only to look at them and they bloom straightway. I always say no credit should be given him. Don't I, colonel?"

"I certainly shan't come to you for a character, my dear, when I want one," says the colonel, giving a refractory look of hers a pull, whereon all her work is undone, and her pretty rippling hair falls once again in a shower upon her shoulders.

"Oh *bother!*" says she with a gay little laugh. Crawford might have been the oldest friend in the world, for all she seems to care about him. She lacks *mauvaise honte*, indeed, to a rather dangerous degree, but there is still something new and therefore fascinating in her utter want of self-consciousness. The colonel laughs too, and at this moment the door opens and Mrs. D'Arcy comes in.

A small vivacious woman, with kindly eyes and a rather inconsequent manner. Not fair enough to be called fair, and not dark enough to be called dark. Nothing definite. With a good word for everybody, and a warm heart, and a tongue that runs like a rippling stream, and a great affection for her husband and the children, of whom Evelyn is always counted one. Her "eldest girl," as she calls her, with a loving glance and smile at her husband's niece when she is introducing her to any one new to them.

"Yes, Mr. Crawford, she is *quite* my own daughter. I have had her ever since she was seven, and indeed a blessing she has been to me. And how do you like the Grange? Always a little gloomy it has seemed to me, but certainly very handsome, and Evelyn and the colonel think the woods perfection. Well, so do I. But I don't walk much, you see; I haven't time; there are so many children, and children mean trouble."

"I have seen one—two of yours," says Crawford, with a kindly remembrance of her allusion to Evelyn as a child also. "Master Jimmy. A handsome boy."

"Yes, isn't he?" a faint flush rising to her face. "Just like the colonel. Same mouth and eyes. The others, I'm sorry to say, take after me. No—no—not a word of that sort. I'm past believing in compliments, and we all can see that to be like the colonel would be an advantage,

Well, and so you like Fenton-by-Sea? A pretty little village isn't it? but so much want always amongst the fishermen. Mr. Vaudrey, our rector, is always lamenting about it. But Jeremiah himself could hardly be of any use to them sometimes, when the season is bad."

"Yes, I've heard. It is terrible. Such want, such losses as there must be. I," hurriedly, "hope to see Mr. Vaudrey soon, and get him to let me help him with those poor fisher folk of his, on whom I'm told his heart is set."

"Ah, he will love you if you will help him there. And it will be good of you," says Mrs. D'Arcy simply, her eyes brightening. "The colonel does what he can, but then there is no money!" with a little expressive wave of the small brown hands. "One always feels as if fishermen were specially to be cared for. Our Lord chose so many of them to be his followers. And indeed they are brave fellows always."

"To be brave is to be great," says Mr. Crawford in a low tone. He is looking down, and now he twines his fingers round each other, as if caught by some unpleasant recollection.

"You don't know Mr. Vaudrey yet?"

"I know nobody, except you and yours. I cannot fancy I shall go farther without faring worse. But Mr. Vaudrey will suit me. I have heard him very highly spoken of as charitable, humane, a good man. If I *can* help him, it will be a pleasure—a great one, a sole one."

He stops as if checking himself; quite suddenly, he looks tired, worn-out; there is a "giving up" sort of expression about his whole face.

"Oh, if you encourage Mr. Vaudrey like *that*, you will have the parish on your shoulders," says Mrs. D'Arcy laughing. "He has no bowels of compassion for the rich, he gives all that to the poor. A *good* man? Yes, he is *that*. The best of men. You will like him certainly, or rather you will respect him. Some people," with an introspective look as if she is privately classifying the "some people," "sneer at him as an enthusiast; but *I* don't, and the colonel doesn't."

Apparently with her the colonel's opinion is final.

"The world wants enthusiasts," says Mr. Crawford. "They are the poor man's best friends. The common-sense people think too long. Whilst they study the subject the poor man dies. It is a sort of 'live, horse, till you get grass!'"

You know the old proverb. All the time the good man full of common sense is straining his eyes through his spectacles to read who should and who should not get the blankets and soup and coals, the poor man is dying from cold and hunger and misery. I speak warmly, because," with a smile, "I fear I am one of the terrible common-sense ones, myself."

"You speak kindly at least," says Mrs. D'Arcy, her gentle face brightening.

"It is all talk—talk," says he with a quick frown. "If I would help the poor, it is only—that I would help myself."

"But you are not poor—you have nothing in common with them," says she simply, rather puzzled, as indeed she well might be, by his strange manner. But the dropping out of the conventional, fashionable life that has been so hateful to him all these years into the calm monotony of the country and into the friendly carelessness of this rather unorthodox family, has upset the usual reserve that has grown to be part of him.

"True," says he, recovering himself. "What I meant was, that everything, even apparently good motives—a desire to raise the condition of the poor for example, as we are on the subject—is all nothing but pure selfishness. Thus we would work out our own——" he pauses.

"Salvation," finishes Mrs. D'Arcy.

"Expiation!" returns he in a low tone. He is very pale. He makes a movement as if to throw back his arms—to breathe afresh. "There is something in this air that is enervating, I think," he says with a sort of laugh, that is unmirthful. "And I have bored you with my platitudes of course. You will tell me not to come again."

"Oh, no," says Mrs. D'Arcy earnestly, who in truth has taken a fancy to him—who is indeed, perhaps, a little flattered in that he has given her so much of his society.

"Well, I have frightened the others at all events," says he, looking round.

The room is empty.

CHAPTER V.

THE colonel, seeing his new guest so well entertained by his wife, had given a wink to Evelyn, and with Stamer had

slipped through the low open window into the straggling garden.

"Your aunt's wonderful—*wonderful*," he says to Evelyn, when they are safely out of earshot. "She can tackle any one. That's the sort of wife to have. Don't you marry, Eaton," with his jolly loud laugh, "until you get some one who can do all the talking for you. Save you a world of trouble."

"Any woman would do for that purpose," says Captain Stamer. Whereon Miss D'Arcy with great reason turns upon him and rends him.

"I like that," cries she. "One would think *you* never talked at all, and that *we* were educated magpies! Why, look at you, colonel! I *never* knew such a chatterbox as you are. All the world has heard of the man who talked the hind leg off an elephant, but only a very few know that *you* are that famous person. Go to! And as for Eaton, there isn't an old fishwoman between this and Fenton who can scold as well as he can."

"I scold?"

"Yes, yes, *yes*. I am a living witness. You scold me, morning, noon and night."

"You! Do you think I'd *dare*? Colonel, you might give a companion in affliction the use of your arm. I feel as if I were going to give way."

"Not you," says Miss D'Arcy with a tilt of her lovely nose. "You wouldn't give way to a saint."

"Why should I? I'd hate a saint."

"At that rate, you leave yourself outside the pale of affection," says she. "For you'd certainly hate the sinner."

"Well, you are not going to chide him for that, are you?" says the colonel.

"Better love a sinner than be indifferent to all things," says she, still scornful.

"Tell you what," says Stamer suddenly, "Crawford's a sinner."

"Eh!" says the colonel, as if startled by the other's tone.

"Oh! it's all nonsense, of course," says the younger man, laughing. "I know nothing about him. He may be immaculate for all I know. And probably he is too. But I can't bear those fellows who keep their eyes upon the

ground, and speak as if every word they said was being weighed."

"And found wanting," says the colonel with another healthy roar. "Did y'ever meet so dull a dog? I couldn't get on with him, not I. Yet you saw how Mrs. D'Arcy managed him. He looks as if life had gone ill with him—as if he'd lost his sweetheart and his last penny; and yet for the latter, at all events, he is good, if accounts be true. Unsociable sort of a beggar he seemed to me, though no doubt there's good in him."

"I'm sure there is," says Evelyn quietly. "I can't think why you don't like him. I suppose in one thing you are right. I'm sure he has been crossed in love. He looks just like that—so melancholy."

"Why don't you say, so interesting?" says Stamer with a quick look at her.

"What! you like him," cries the colonel. "Well, girls are odd. Now I thought you'd have turned up your nose at a worthless sort of fellow like that."

"He is *not* worthless," says Evelyn.

"No. He has got twenty thousand a year," says Stamer shortly. "Got a light, colonel?"

"No—I don't know—yes, I have," says the colonel, bringing out a solitary vesuvian from some subterranean pocket. "And, by Jove, talking of Crawford reminds me that I ought to go in, and get him a B. and S."

"He'll be too pious to drink it," says Stamer, who is evidently in a bad mood.

"Tell him I recommend it," says Miss D'Arcy, who is, it must be confessed, *tant soit peu coquette*, making a little *moue* at her uncle over her shoulder, "and he is sure to forget all his principles."

"I'll tell him," says the colonel airily, as he moves towards the house, leaving the other two alone.

They have passed the drooping roses, now hastening to their death, and have come out upon a narrower walk, where branches of the strongly scented syringa brush them as they go by.

"You meant that," says Stamer with all the air of one who is defying her to deny it.

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"Well, why shouldn't I mean it?"

"Why should you not indeed. Still, let me tell you, it was rather a conceited speech for any girl to make about a man she had only seen twice."

"And here is a rude one to counterbalance it."

"I can't see that I've been rude," stiffly.

"Can't you?" with growing displeasure. "Can you see that you have been absurd then? Not even *that*? You *are* dull to-day."

"How am I dull?"

"To imagine for a moment I meant such words as those. You know perfectly that I only said them because—to—well, because I was stupid too, I suppose, in my own way. Not," with a little flash from her dark eyes, "so bad a way as *yours*, however. Why, as I tell you, I only saw him twice in my life—yesterday and to-day—for a few minutes each time!"

"It is true for all that," says Stamer in a rather sudden fashion.

"What is?"

"That you could turn him round your little finger, if it so suited you."

"Nonsense!"

"He admires you already so much that——"

"I must really beg, Eaton, that you will not talk to me like this."

"He does for all that," says the young man doggedly. "I could see it in every change of his face. He could speak to nobody but you."

"Not even to auntie?" with a short and unlovely laugh.

"Oh, as for that, he *should* be civil to her, if he wishes to see you often. That was merely kissing the nurse for the sake of the child."

"*Well!*" says Miss D'Arcy, coming to a standstill, and proceeding to examine her companion's face with quite an absorbing interest. "You *look* sane," says she; "but you can't be. Lunatics are very deceptive. Why, what can be the matter with you to-day? There is one thing, you used not to be—vulgar. Did you know you could be that?"

"Did you know you could lose your temper over a perfect stranger?"

"Over an old friend, rather. But if old friends prove unpleasant why should one put up with them?"

"Well, I'm not going home yet, if that's what you mean,"

says Captain Stamer. "And I'm not going to quarrel with you either about a fellow like Crawford."

"I hope you won't quarrel with me about anybody," says she coldly. "And as to Mr. Crawford, where would the quarrel lie? Suppose, as you insinuate, that he *did* see imaginary charms in me, what is that to you, or any one?"

"What is it to *you*?"

"You refuse the question. The fact is you detest this perfect stranger who has dropped into our midst."

"I don't believe he is by any means a *perfect* stranger."

"That is very unjust. You know nothing to his disadvantage."

"Or to his advantage either."

"What on earth can he have done to you?" says Evelyn, with a rather exasperating insinuation.

"To *me*?" haughtily. "Nothing! I don't fancy him, certainly, but——"

"It is a paltry thing to dislike a man without a reason," interrupts she promptly.

"Well," says Stamer, "if you must have one, I don't like his face, his expression, his eyes, his mouth; there is something that might be termed generally, 'repression,' about him. He looks as if he might go off at any moment without a word of warning. He should be labelled 'Dangerous.'"

"Glass! 'This side up with care,'" quotes she contemptuously. "Well, if *that* is all."

"It really is all, I'm afraid," with a regretful smile. "It is plain that he would have found pleasure in bringing facts to bear on Mr. Crawford's implied unpleasantness if he could, and is quite frankly sorry that he can't. "You must admit, however, that his face is out of the common."

"A charm, surely. In a world where every one—who has not had the advantage of being blown up—has two eyes, a nose and a mouth, there is certainly a distinction in being able to look a little different from one's fellows."

"Not in his case, however. He'd be more agreeable if he were more like his fellows. Commoner, no doubt, but more human. Why," with a touch of irritability—"why can't he smile properly?"

"He *does* look sad, doesn't he?" says she eagerly; "that struck me too. Some grief, some hidden sorrow is troubling him. Perhaps——"

"Oh, perhaps, perhaps," interrupts her companion, with

disgraceful rudeness. "If you are going to pity him, there's no more to be said. When a girl begins to pity a man, there's no stopping her. We all know where pity leads."

"Do you know where this path leads?" asks she, with astonishing sweetness. But *he* is not astonished by it. He understands it.

"If one were to climb over that wall in front of us, it would probably lead one home," says he, as if declining subterfuge. "But I hate climbing. And, as I was saying, I think any pity you may lay on Crawford will be a dead loss. To my coarser vision there is nothing sentimental about him. Nothing, except——"

"What?" sharply.

"I don't know," lamely.

"I wonder you aren't *ashamed* of yourself," says Miss D'Arcy, with deep contempt. "You are trying as hard as you can to take away that man's character, and all for what? Through sheer idleness. You want to prejudice me against him."

"I do," gloomily.

"But why, *why*?" impatiently.

"I don't know. I don't like the fellow. There's something queer about him."

"He's your Doctor Fell," says she.

"Well, perhaps so," says he, as if tired of the argument.

Here, indeed, both the combatants, as if tired, lay down their arms for a season, and silently proclaim a truce. A brittle one; their tempers being still on edge, they tread softly as if afraid to venture beyond a certain limit.

CHAPTER VI.

"LOVELY day," says Captain Stamer, by way of proving the freshness of his geniality, with an exhaustive look around him. Alas! the day refuses to support his kindly judgment on it. Demon-like, it betrays him. The rain of last night, that this morning—nay, that five minutes ago—had seemed to be a thing so remote as to be placed in the category of injuries over and done with for ever, now with an angry rush flies up from the sea, and threatens to envelope them at any moment.

"Delicious!" says Miss D'Arcy, with a stern determination to agree with him on every point in spite of all obstacles. As she speaks a huge rain-drop falls into her left eye. "Pah!" says she, digging the knuckle of her little first finger into the insulted member.

"It is only a summer shower," says Stamer, glancing however with keenest suspicion upon the lowering heavens above. The blue has disappeared, the gilded clouds are gone; there is nothing left but greys, and such dull pigments.

"Nothing more," says she valiantly, although the drops are pattering now so hard about her feet that the gravel seems to rise to meet them.

"Come in here. Come quickly!" cries Stamer eagerly, forgetting his *rôle*; and catching her by the arm he runs her into a dilapidated summer-house hard by, that seems fit to harbour only beetles, slugs, and such wild beasts.

It is a little haven, however, for them, as, however bad it is, it keeps out the heavy angry rain that June sometimes as if in malice sends down upon her admirers. Perhaps she is a coquette this June of ours, that we all love, and finds a mad delight in scattering abroad and bringing to great grief the sincerest of her admirers.

"Pouf! Who'd have thought it?" says Evelyn, with a little light laugh, shaking the dewy drops from her head and hands—her charming head that is hatless, and crowned only by its own lovely curls.

"Who, indeed. It was an ideal day, two minutes ago. Are you sure no rain is coming through there? No? Come closer to me. This side seems the most waterproof."

"I'm all right," says Evelyn, refusing this inviting offer.

"I hear this tennis tournament is coming off next week."

"Yes, and I'm so sorry; I had so wished that Marian would be home for it."

"Well, she will be. My mother had a letter from her this morning, saying she is to be back on Friday next."

"No? *Really?*" turning an eager face to his. "Are you sure? Oh, I *am* glad! And she will play, of course. Now I can feel some pleasure in it."

"Have the players been drawn yet?"

"Oh, no! Nor handicapped either. I think your brother is to be one of the handicappers."

"Who has got up this affair?" asks Stamer, who has been

away with his regiment and has only just now returned on a three months' leave.

"Mrs. Vaudrey."

"I wonder the rector stands such a burst of frivolity."

"Mr. Vaudrey is not so narrow as all that. He may devote his own life to the poor, but he does not expect every one else to do the same. He likes to see people amusing themselves. He says tennis is a healthful amusement."

"Ah! His own girls are growing up," says Stamer. "That's the way with all of them. I knew a parson once who thought dancing one of the cardinal sins. He preached steadily against it for fifteen years, yet the first thing he did when his eldest girl was thirteen was to engage a dancing mistress for her. They *must* marry off the girls, you see."

"I daresay, I daresay," says Miss D'Arcy vaguely, who has evidently not been listening. "Did you hear that the Duchess of Carminster is to be present at this tournament?"

"My dear girl! Have you not yet grasped the fact that I have been home a week, and that the whole place is ringing with the news that the duchess is coming *at last* to stay at the Castle. I'm sick of the very name of the duchess by this time."

"Well, I'm not," says Miss D'Arcy briskly. "I'm longing to see her. Tell me what she is like. One doesn't see a duchess every day, let me tell you, and I'm not above wanting to see a real live one before I die."

"Candid child! You'll be gratified then, for she's about as alive as they make 'em. Honestly," says Captain Stamer, changing his tone, "she's quite as nice a woman as ever you met."

"You know her, then?"

"In a way. I've been staying with her now and again at her place in Devonshire. She's a widow, as, of course, you know."

"I don't. I never thought about her—until now that she is coming. I suppose she is a very grand person—very haughty, I mean."

"She's not the orthodox duchess at all," says Stamer. "You know *they* are all born old, *very* old. They are never young, but this one is. They step into life full-grown, with high white hair and hook noses and a *pince-nez*, and a supercilious glance that freezes everybody. And she

isn't as haughty as she ought to be, she's—if one may be allowed the word where a duchess is concerned—rather *larky*! She likes people who make her laugh, and her guests are generally of the wits from the upper ten, generously filtered all through by a small stream of lesser folks that hail from Bohemia."

"And under which of those heads do you appear?"

"Oh, as for me," says the young man frankly, "she only asks me when she has tableaux vivants or private theatricals on. I'm of use there, do you see?" There isn't a spark of vanity about this speech.

"She's going to be at the tournament, anyway. She has promised Mrs. Vaudrey. She—Mrs. Vaudrey—is always darkly hinting at the fact that the duchess was once in love with her brother, Lord Sainton. I suppose we may take that with as many grains of salt as we like."

"Mrs. Vaudrey's a fool," says Stamer indifferently. "Duchesses don't grow on every bush, d'ye see, and so one makes a lot of them when one *does* find them. However, if she comes to the tournament it will give it an impetus. I wonder who you will be drawn with. If you are drawn with me," with a light laugh, "I pity the others."

"Now who is making a conceited speech?"

"Have you been thinking about that ever since? Well, you *are* a cross little thing."

"No, I'm not. Not a bit crosser than anybody else. It is you, who have been out of temper all the morning, and why? If your mother has been as horrid to you as she is to everybody else," flushing hotly, "that is no reason why you should come here and be uncivil to me."

"How have I been uncivil?"

"In a thousand ways. If it *isn't* your mother then, what is it?"

She has turned to face him, her eyes angry. The truce plainly is at an end. Her little old cotton frock that clings so lovingly to her young, beautiful, *svelte* figure, catching in a nail in the ancient summer-house, he stoops to release it.

"Nothing," says he, looking up at her, a trifle nervously, from his half-kneeling position. "Only——"

"Only what?" imperiously.

"I wish you would give up training those ponies and colts," says he, rising to his feet and speaking with studied determination.

"Is that it?" says she, drawing her breath rather quickly. "What a long time you have been coming to it. And after all, why should I?"

She has grown very pale, very defiant, and the small slight fingers clasped together are twitching nervously.

"Because it is abominable work for a child like you."

"You think it unladylike; why not say it?"

"Well, I *do* say it," shortly.

"I shan't give it up for all that. What!" blazing round at him suddenly. "Am I to cease from helping the colonel, just because you and your mother think me a hoyden? Yes, yes, that's the word; I've heard it often enough to remember it. I've been told that that is Lady Stamer's usual name for me."

"By whom?"

"Never mind. *That's* not the point."

"By Mrs. Vaudrey, of course. She would do anything to bring my mother into disfavour. But if she told you that I ever called you a hoyden or anything else disrespectful, she lied."

"It is as bad to think it as to say it."

"I have neither thought it nor said it."

"Oh! as for *that!*" says she with a shrug of her supple shoulders.

"What do you mean by that?" exclaims he, flinging his ill-kept temper to the winds. "That you don't believe me? Speak, Evelyn!"

"Now *don't* get into a passion," says Miss D'Arcy, with the most aggravating pretence at soothing him, rubbing him down, and reducing him to a proper state of calmness.

"Pshaw!" says he, turning away. The rain has worn itself out, and now once again the heavens are blue, and all over the west great fleecy banks of clouds are lying. Captain Stamer stepping into the brilliant light outside the summer house, makes a step or two along the gravel path as if in mad haste to be gone, and then checks himself.

"I must say," says he, looking back at her with an angry expression, "you are about the most aggravating person I ever met in my life. I make a simple remark to you in the most friendly spirit about what *should* be for your good, and if I was your worst enemy, meaning an insult in every syllable, you could not have taken me more unpleasantly."

"How like your mother you are," says she, glancing at

him over a very raised and unfriendly shoulder. "That's the way she speaks when she has been giving me one of her lectures. You needn't give me an additional dose. I know her."

"You don't know me, at all events," with a throb of passion.

"Quite well enough," nonchalantly. "And after all, it comes to this," cries she, "that I won't give up helping the colonel for all the old gossips and goody-goodies the parish contains. You call him my uncle; I call him not only my uncle but my father too. He has given me so much love that I never never can repay him. He has hardly a penny, as you know, except what he makes by his horses, and *no one* can train them as I can." This with conscious pride. "I have a *hand*, they tell me; I can give them a mouth. He says himself that he wouldn't get half he does for the young ones, but for me."

"He therefore sacrifices you." He must indeed have been off his head when he ventured *this* remark.

"How *dare* you?" cries she passionately, hot tears rushing to her eyes. "How *dare* you so speak of the colonel? He—he——" she pauses, as if unable to give voice to her indignation, and two large pearly drops fall down her cheeks. "You don't understand him; you are incapable of it," she hurls at him at length.

"I do—I do," puts in the young man contritely, rather frightened at the storm he has raised.

"No, you don't. He would not sacrifice any one. He is always sacrificing himself. There is nobody like him, not one."

"He is the best fellow I know," says Stamer. "But there is this. He doesn't see, perhaps—he doesn't grasp the fact that a girl like you should not be made a—a stable boy!"

This is terrible. In his anxiety, his desire to amend matters, he has waded into the deepest depths.

"*Go home!*" says Miss D'Arcy, in a low but terrible tone. "Was that your mother's last comment upon me? No; not a word. I won't listen. And indeed why should you speak? you could never excel *that*."

"Forgive me, Evelyn," exclaims he anxiously, shocked too late by his own words. "I could not have spoken like that, but that I feel so much. We are such old friends,

and I—it was the thought that *other* men might think oddly of you, that drove me to such a rudeness.”

“What other men?” with a curl of her lip.

“That Crawford, for example. He saw you. He——”

“Mr. Crawford is a gentleman,” interrupts she curtly. “He therefore knows a lady when he sees one. I am not afraid of *his* verdict.”

“After that, I may as well go indeed,” says Stamer deeply affronted; and with a slight bow to her he disappears amongst the bushes.

Miss D’Arcy, having upheld herself with much vigour in a most dignified position until the last faint sound of his footsteps has ceased upon the air, now permits herself to fall out of line, and sinking upon the rickety old seat of the summer-house, that is the home of countless wriggling beasts, gives herself up to unbounded wrath.

He! *He* to dictate to her, to call her a stable-boy! Why a tom-boy wouldn’t have been half as bad. He was insulting, insolent, hateful! And if he thinks she is going to endure such impertinence as that, he—he—well—he *little knows*. And after all, what business is it of his if she rides colts and ponies from morning till night? Who is he, that he should object to her pursuits? Is he her brother, or her cousin or her—aunt? The word seems to drop in quite naturally.

Miss D’Arcy startles the earwigs by a sardonic laugh. A maiden aunt—an old maid, that’s what he *ought* to be; with his perpetual lectures and fault-findings. Really it is too much of a good thing that he should give himself such airs with her.

Say he is an old friend. The oldest friend she has. Very well then. But even the oldest friend has no right to exceed certain limits; and he has exceeded everything. He has called her horrid names, and laid down lines for her as though he were the arbiter of her destiny. And *what* a name to call her! Certainly there are times when Eaton gets past enduring. And does he think she is going to pass over this last crowning insult in silence? Not likely!

It will be many a long day before she will speak to *him* again.

Feeling wonderfully relieved on coming to this violent determination she springs to her feet and makes her way to the house, still raging as she goes. She’ll let him *see*! She’ll punish him!

CHAPTER VII.

THAT good old romp called Tennis, is always in high favour at Fenton-by-Sea. Not a man, woman or child there, independent of crutches, or out of the perambulator, but plays it all day long, from the middle of May, when they catch severe colds that last them well into the autumn, to the end of October, when they contract severe coughs that cling to them until the following spring.

Still "vive le jeu!" What can anything matter so long as one is well enough to wield the gallant racket, and knock out his neighbour's eye with the saucy ball?

There was once a naughty man with a bad disposition who used to punish his enemies in such wise. Just give him the smallest reason for offence, and he would challenge you to a game of tennis that day, or next week, or the following month, and having got you he would dexterously plant a ball in your right orb and make you see stars for an hour or so. He would then apologize profusely. It was safe, and it was sure, and no man could swear he had done it on purpose.

Tennis is a good game, no doubt. What *would* become of the country folk without it? But that modern misery, the tennis tournament, can hardly be regarded as an unmixed joy. So far as my experience goes I think it leads to more "evil speaking, lying and slandering," to more "envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness," than any other form of amusement extant. Indeed, perhaps if we throw in the "battle, murder and sudden death," we shan't be altogether in the wrong. Every man's hand is against every man; chivalry dies at once. And in the smaller country places where these unfortunate collisions annually take place, the almost inevitable result is, that at least two or three families cease to be on visiting terms, the junior branches of each being so heavily afflicted with ophthalmia that they fail to see each other even when brought face to face in private roads, in drawing-rooms, or at church.

It is not indeed until the near approach of the following Christmas, when church decorations give a good field for flirtation, that their eyesight is mercifully restored, and they see and know each other again, until—the next tournament.

To-day the first tournament of the season takes place at

Fenton-by-Sea. From time immemorial all public games have been carried through at Parklands, the residence of Sir Bertram Stamer; a tall, silent, lazy-looking man of about thirty-five, who had been in the Guards, but at his father's death, five years ago, had sold out, more to please his mother than himself, and come down, presumably to reign over Parklands. This trouble, however, his mother very considerably took off his hands, ordering and regulating everything so perfectly, and with so evident a determination to be queen regnant, that Sir Bertram, who is easy-going to a fault, sank into his secondary place at once.

She is a large woman, eagle-eyed, hooked-nosed—very unpleasant. Ambitious for her sons, now that ambition for herself is at an end; devoted to her eldest born, careless of her second son—beyond the fact that he must marry well, to raise the prestige of the family. To this end, she is not only eager, but indeed determined to help him; and for this purpose has selected a near neighbour of hers, a girl of large fortune and good family, as a suitable wife for him. That anything, that *any one* should dare to step in and spoil her plans would seem to her arrogance almost impossible. And yet there are moments when she doubts, and doubting hates the author of her fears.

Every one had been quite sure it would be a wet day, so naturally it is a fine one. Early in the morning the courts had been rolled and mown for the last time, the dying roses in the gardens plucked off, the walks swept, everything put in severest order. Not only the neighbourhood, but pretty nearly the whole county has been invited, and already the terraces and pleasure grounds are filling with smart folk in their very best attire, who have come presumably to see their friends defeated at tennis, in reality to see the Duchess of Carminster, who has promised to shed a radiance over the joust.

All the women are looking very jubilant, the men a little depressed; just a few of them, who in their white flannels may reasonably be supposed to be embryo conquerors in the struggle at hand, are marching about dropping a word here and there, and evidently in overflowing spirits. Of these is Mr. Blount, a beardless young gentleman of any age from eighteen to twenty-eight, a nephew of Lady Stamer's, now staying at Parklands; as he is pretty nearly always at Parklands, this last is scarcely worth recording.

He is a remarkably ugly young man, middle-sized, stout, without a single redeeming feature, except his eyes, which, if small, are so thoroughly alive to the ludicrous as to be admirable.

"I say, Evelyn, here you are," cries he, pouncing upon Miss D'Arcy as she comes slowly towards him across the grass, the colonel beside her. "How do, colonel? Nice chilly day for a game of this sort, eh?"

"Apoplexy, apoplexy, that's what it *will* mean," says the colonel. "Thought I'd never get here. Every step was a misery. I'm getting old, sir, getting old."

"Bah! get along with you," says Mr. Blount, giving him a playful dig in the ribs. "I like to hear boys like you making fun of us old fogeys; bet you forty to one, colonel, you'll be a baby still when I'm a hoary-headed sinner. Seen Marian?" to Evelyn.

"Yes; just as we came here. She was with Lady Stamer."

"She was anxious to see you. I thought by her eye there was a scolding in store for you, and rather went out of my way to give you the warning wink; but unfortunately I took it into my head that you'd come by the short cut across the fields, and lo! and behold, you came by the orthodox avenue."

"You gave yourself a great deal of trouble for nothing," says Evelyn. "Neither she nor anybody else has seen fit to lecture me *as yet*; not even Lady Stamer. However, I live in hope."

"You'll win to day," says Mr. Blount with a nod.

"Oh, no. In the ladies' singles, do you mean?"

"Yes. I'll bet my bottom dollar on you."

"*Don't!*" says Miss D'Arcy, as if frightened. "Bartholomew"—such is his euphonious name—"Bartholomew," in a wheedling tone, "I wish you wouldn't speak like that. I wish you'd try to think I *wouldn't* win; it is so much luckier."

"Dear little superstitious Irish girl!" says Bartholomew, with a truly beautiful, if slightly hypocritical smile. "I'll accede to your wishes. I give up my honest opinion, and now declare to you that a worse wielder of the racket than your silly self I never saw; and that anything like your presumption in coming forward to try and win the golden apple of this year has, up to this, been unheard of. Will that do?"

"Mrs. Wilding-Weekes will win it," says she.

"She may—she may. She's rapid enough for that or anything. I do like that woman; there's no pretence about her."

"I like her," says Miss D'Arcy, rather curtly.

"Well, so do I, my good child. Ain't I saying so. Give me candour before anything. Besides, she's tremendously amusing, which can't be said of every one. Heard of her last row with Weekes?"

"I don't want to," says Evelyn, Mrs. Wilding-Weekes' rows with her husband coming under the head of periodicals.

"It was Pouncefort of the 10th, this time," says Mr. Blount unabashed. "Weekes found him grovelling at her feet—'sprawling on the floor,' he called it—last Tuesday. There was a rather better display of fireworks than usual."

"I wonder you aren't ashamed of yourself, Bartholomew," says Evelyn indignantly.

"You wonder *she* isn't, you mean."

"I don't indeed. I don't care what people say. She may be a little bit of a flirt," regarding him anxiously, "but I don't believe there is a scrap of harm in her. And she is the kindest woman in the world."

"That's where it is," says Mr. Blount. "She's quite too awfully kind, don't you know. I entirely agree with you, my best of girls."

"I can't bear you when you talk like that."

"Then I'll talk like *this*. Nice weather for crops, isn't it? but perhaps a trifle too dry. The coming harvest won't be as good as the harvest all we old people remember gathering two or three hundred years ago. Did you know that Mrs. Dumpling's niece has married the Marchmonts' groom? No? Oh, law! yes, my dear; and they had——"

"Don't you think there is somebody else you ought to show some attention to?" says Miss D'Arcy severely, having regard to the fact that he is her hostess's nephew; also with a view to showing her displeasure.

"Not a soul. Isn't there anybody *you* want to be kinder to than you are to me? There is!" tragically, seeing a sudden unhappy change in her mobile face. "Who is it? Let me know the worst."

"I suppose," says she reluctantly, "I ought to go and say how d'y'e do to Lady Stamer, I haven't done it yet."

"It would be a step in the right direction certainly. Come, let's take it together. Like all doses, once down one feels the better for them—or at least one *should*. Shall I?"—seeing with a glance that she shrinks from the small ordeal—"see you through it? In these cases of assault and battery, it is always better to have a witness on *your* side."

"You may laugh," says Evelyn ruefully; "but she is always so horrid to me that—— And what have I ever done to her?" cries she petulantly.

"Ah! that's just it," says Bartholomew, who knows exactly what she has done. "By Jove! here *is* Lady Stamer. What a happy meeting! My dear aunt, here is another young lady who is dying to tell you what a lovely day it is."

"How d'ye do?" says Lady Stamer frigidly, giving Evelyn two reluctant fingers.

"How d'ye do?" says Evelyn icily, refusing to press them.

On this ensues a deadly pause, that threatens to be eternal, but for Mr. Blount, who is nothing if not useful. To be ornamental has been put out of his power by malignant fate—or rather his mother, who in her time was the ugliest woman alive.

"Well, go on," says he, addressing Evelyn in a reproving tone. "You haven't said it yet. It *is* a fine day, isn't it?" reproachfully. "No need to tell a lie *this* time. Lady Stamer has only heard it on forty-eight occasions up to this, and is therefore as yet imperfect in it. Give her another lesson."

At this Miss D'Arcy, in spite of her nervousness, smiles—a rather wintry smile—and as here most opportunely a fresh-comer claims Lady Stamer's words and looks, she accepts her chance, and flies precipitately.

"I saw you safely through that, anyway, eh?" says Mr. Blount, who has flown with her, in a tone of much self-gratulation.

"You did. You did indeed," gratefully. "After that first awful 'how d'ye do?' I didn't know from Adam what to say next."

"I'm of the greatest use to all my friends," says Mr. Blount modestly. "I don't really see how they could get on without me. As I never quarrel with any one, I'm always at hand, d'ye see, to make up the incessant guerilla

warfares that seem to be going on from morning until night amongst my acquaintances."

"Oh! I don't see that," says Miss D'Arcy. "You aren't the only peaceable person in the world, I suppose. You do give yourself airs, I must say. I'm not a quarrelsome person at all; not at all."

"Of course not. How could you think I alluded to you? Present company always excepted. My dear Evelyn, it would take a member of Parliament from your own land to come to loggerheads with you. I don't suppose you have a feud with any one living. I say, there's Eaton. Shall I call him? Hallo, Ea——"

"No, no," cries Miss D'Arcy, catching his arm. "*Don't!*" Then, as he turns a quizzical eye on her, "I mean—that is"—blushing a hot and lovely red—"I——"

"Not another word," entreats Mr. Blount politely. "You are not on your oath, you know. You and he are not on speaking terms for the moment. I *quite* understand. And very natural too. Man as a whole is a melancholy failure. Woman, on the contrary, is a grand success. One can see then at a glance how impossible it is for the latter to put up with the follies—and *worse*—of the former. Eaton has—I can see at once—been playing the fool with a vengeance. As a member of his species I feel I should plead for forgiveness for him, but really I can't. I haven't the courage. I can see at once that the patience of woman must be at an end, and that man, the inconsequent, should be let run to ruin in his own way."

"*You'll* never run anywhere," says Miss D'Arcy wrathfully. "You won't even run *down*. You're a clock that will go for ever, without winding. I never knew any one who could talk so much nonsense as you in a given time."

"However small the line, perfection in it must count for something," says Mr. Blount mournfully. "I feel I am beneath your notice; but Eaton, happy fellow, apparently is not. You *can* show displeasure to him; you *can't* to me. This is indeed humiliation. But I rise from it to do you, the ungrateful one, a service."

"You needn't," says Miss D'Arcy, carrying out the character he has given her to perfection. "Lie as low as you like; I shan't be the one to rouse you."

"I am not to be deterred from my duty, Evelyn, by any such paltry asides. I understand you better than you do

yourself. Eaton has been presumptuous. And too much of anything, we all know, is good for nothing. A little wholesome correction will be the saving of him, if indeed anything can redeem that savage—man.”

“I assure you, Bartholomew, you have taken up quite an absurd impression. Eaton has not——”

“Now my dear girl, don’t waste your time. Fibbing to Bartholomew means always that. I run as I read, and I’m positive that Eaton has——Hah!” stopping short and staring at a turn in the avenue that can be seen through the shrubberies where they are standing. Not only his eyes but his ears are satisfied. The heavy trampling sound of horses’ feet comes to them across the grass and trees.

“Now then!” says he, laying solemn hands on Miss D’Arcy, and so turning her as to face the house. “Hold up your chin; your face a little more *this* way, miss, if you please,” with a professional air. “Pull out your frock—*so*. Now look at me and *smile*. Hah! that will do. Now, don’t wink! For here’s her grace at last.”

CHAPTER VIII.

HERE she is indeed, and in great feather apparently. There is a general sensation; an honest straining of necks to see her on the part of half the community, a most dishonest attempt at indifference on the part of the other half.

Now she has reached the hall-door. Now she has descended from the carriage and is beaming blandly on everything and everybody.

Lady Stamer is hurrying across the lawn to receive her, raging furiously as she goes at the fact that Mrs. Vaudrey, her life-long enemy, is already hobnobbing with the duchess, becking and nodding at her with all the vigour (and it is a good deal) of which she is capable.

Mrs. Vaudrey indeed—to use her own expression uttered later on—has been careful to be *upon the spot* (wherever that may be) at the moment of the duchess’s arrival, and has rushed forward to welcome her with as much effusion as though she were mistress of the ceremonies and Parklands to boot.

In fact for a full minute the duchess—who has not the

Sainton family well in mind at the moment—and whose memory is not as good as her intentions—so considers her, and pours out upon her all sorts of civil nothings. It is only for a minute, however, and as providentially no names are named nothing comes of it.

"Ah! Here is Lady Stamer *at last*," says Mrs. Vaudrey, and her grace, with a little inward gasp and a strong desire for laughter, goes over it all again heroically.

"So glad! So charmed! What a quite too lovely place. And such a *delicious* day. Perfect queen's weather, isn't it? And this is Carminster," pulling forward her little duke, a small boy of about seven with a pretty rosy face and a stout pair of legs. His grace drags off his cap, after a hint from his mother, says "yes" and "no" in the right place, but in an absent-minded fashion, with his eyes on the distant tents, where no doubt are the flesh-pots of Egypt, and generally permits himself to be made much of in a placid sort of way.

"Not half the manner of my Herbert," says Mrs. Vaudrey to herself with deep complacency, which indeed is the solemn truth; Master Vaudrey—aged nine—being one in a thousand so far as conversational talent goes.

And now the train sweeps on. It is coming this way. The duchess is flanked on one side by Lady Stamer and on the other by Mrs. Vaudrey, who refuses to be relegated to a lower position, and holds up her head valiantly as if to remind everybody of the Hon. that is tacked on to her name. In vain Lady Stamer frowns her down; Mrs. Vaudrey is in her most airy mood and is doing the amiable to the duchess, who takes her advances very pleasantly. It is all the same to the duchess. She has got to talk so much in such a length of time, and it isn't of the least consequence who is to be the recipient of her remarks. But to Lady Stamer all this is gall and wormwood. Mrs. Vaudrey of all people—detestable woman—in a gown that might have come out of Noah's Ark, and a bonnet that will probably be the height of the fashion in a dozen years to come, but *not now*. And she had meant to have everything so entirely as it should be. A desire to fall on Mrs. Vaudrey and smite her hip and thigh is raging within her whilst she talks platitudes and looks mildly at her august guest.

Meanwhile the duchess, who is in exuberant spirits, and who affects a royal memory without having it, is walking

about, telling everybody how delighted she is to see them again. As it is fourteen years since last she was at Fenton, this is remarkably good of her! Few of us are so constant in our friendships. It is perhaps a little unfortunate that some of those upon whom she presses this old friendship—whom she makes a point of specially remembering—should be people who never saw her until this afternoon.

However, this breaks no bones. Nobody is offended by it. It is always something to have shaken hands with a duchess.

She is an extremely big woman, young still, with a florid complexion, large violet eyes, hair the colour of a tar-barrel, and no nose to speak of. The daughter of an earl and the wife of a dead duke, she has yet about as much the sacred touch of race about her as the orthodox milk-maid.

She looks as pleasant as you like, however, which covers a multitude of wrong features, and goes about now beaming, like the sun, on the just and the unjust alike. She is attended by a host of satellites besides Lady Stamer and Mrs. Vaudrey, people staying with her at the Castle, and chosen rather indiscriminately, to say the least of it.

The business of the day has commenced. The battle rages fiercely. The hot sun, regardless of the comfort of the players, is pouring down its rays upon the several courts in a strictly impartial fashion.

Evelyn, having come victoriously through one single, flings her racket to the colonel, who is absurdly proud of her success so far, and drops thankfully into a low seat near her.

"What a good-looking child!" says the duchess. "And can't she *play*! I really hope she'll win. So nice to be able to run about like that and defy old Sol. I should think the prize for the ladies' single is sure to be hers; I'm thinking of getting up some theatricals or tableaux at the Castle, and—does that little girl belong to this neighbourhood?"

"Well—not exactly," begins Lady Stamer in her chilliest drawl, but Mrs. Vaudrey interrupts.

"Oh yes; quite near, close at hand," says she briskly. "And she is such a dear girl. Nice people altogether; but poor, you know, poor."

"That's nothing," says the duchess, with great geniality. I daresay she has taken a good-natured glance at Mrs. Vaudrey's gown.

"Just so—just so," says that irrepressible person. "The

colonel, her uncle, is delightful. They are Irish, you know, and——”

“Irish—how interesting! I *knew* there was something queer about her,” says her grace, with all the air of one who has just discovered a wild animal of an interesting species. “Positively I must get an introduction.”

Not yet, however; the final tie is being now played, and Miss D’Arcy is once again *en évidence*. She looks like a slim fairy flitting here and there, taking her balls without a mistake, and seemingly without exertion. The heat that has made her opponent—a daughter of a neighbouring squire—almost apoplectic, has given her only an undue pallor. It is a sharply-contested game, but the sequel leaves Evelyn the winner of the gold bracelet that the duchess has kindly consented to give away.

Pale, tired, yet certainly and very naturally filled with a sense of triumph, she makes her way swiftly across the court to a little corner behind the rhododendrons, that is so out of sight as to be unknown to the many. Eaton Stamer, as she passes him, gives her a glance of congratulation largely fraught with appeal, but taking no notice of it she leaves him behind her unforgiven, and finding her coveted recess throws herself upon the rustic bench, and draws her breath in long sweet gasps. Oh! what a struggle it has been. Her enemy was strong—but how sweet is victory!

She smiles to herself in a little exhausted way as she leans back against the seat. She is indeed almost too tired to show resentment when a tall, gaunt figure, coming up the path upon her right, stops before her.

CHAPTER IX

“IT was folly to play like that on such a day,” says Mr. Crawford almost vehemently, his usually subdued manner quite shaken. “You have over-exerted yourself.”

“No, no,” says she, smiling again. It is impossible to be angry with this melancholy, quiet man.

“You have!” says he with decision. “You are looking terribly white.”

“Better than looking terribly red,” says she, with a slight laugh that is suggestive of tears, so full of fatigue it sounds.

"You are thinking of your adversary," says he with a half-smile. "Poor girl! she was twice undone. But it was presumption on her part to dream of defeating you. However, we may let her go by. As you are strong, I am sure you are merciful."

"I assure you she was a worthy opponent," says Evelyn. "You need not think I won easily. It was as much as I could do to cry 'Victory!'"

"I can see that," says he. "You are very tired; you must not stay here any longer in the sun. Come"—holding out his hand to her with an air of decision—"come with me to one of those tents over there, and let me give you some iced cup or—well, water, if you prefer it."

Evelyn, rising mechanically, follows him. That iced water had a tempting sound. It somehow gives her pleasure, too, to be able to refuse any knowledge of Eaton Stamer's existence as once again she passes him, Mr. Crawford by her side.

Inside the tent coolness reigns as well as solitude. Evelyn, sinking thankfully on to a seat, accepts with gratitude the iced water that Mr. Crawford brings her. Even here through the chinks of the awnings the hot sun sends a ray every now and then, and from far off the music of the band, so suggestive of movement, of activity, comes to them. Still it is delicious here—the very far-offness of the world outside giving it a charm. Too tired to care to talk, Evelyn, leaning back in her chair, gives herself up a ready prisoner to indolence. Mr. Crawford may talk to her if he likes, but she—she cannot talk to any one.

And for five minutes or so Mr. Crawford does talk, content to get a vague "yes" or "no" for answer from the tired child, and then, being of a nature that desires silence for himself, he too drops out of the desultory conversation, and except for the buzzing of a dissipated blue-bottle that has got into a wine-glass and is too intoxicated to get out of it again, no sound can be heard.

Silence however, is sometimes as irritating as noise. Evelyn, waking up presently from her delightful waking siesta, becomes conscious of the fact that neither she nor Mr. Crawford have opened their lips for a considerable time. Is he angry with her? Has she been rude? Thus startled into life, she leans her elbow on the table, and turns an apologetic glance on her companion.

It is thrown away. Mr. Crawford sees neither her nor any one, save, perhaps, some being from his dead past. His thoughts are not here, at any rate, in this sweet, cool tent, with the sweetest of all companions by his side; they are straggling farther afield—or backward, who shall say? At all events, they are not happy thoughts.

His brows are knitted; his lips are compressed. One might easily imagine that the teeth beneath them are clenched. He is stooping forward with one hand bound within the other, and a pallor suggestive of a cruel strain upon the whole man covers his face.

Evelyn, gazing at him, feels a sudden sense of fear overcome her. Instinctively she shrinks backwards, and then, as if ashamed of herself, straightens herself again deliberately. Poor man! Some great, some unconquerable grief is his. And how silently, how nobly he bears it. Not a murmur, a whisper to any one. It must have been some woman who has made him sad like that—some woman whom he had loved long ago, and never forgotten. Perhaps she had loved some one else, and——

Animal magnetism here declares itself. Mr. Crawford feeling, without knowing it, the kindly commiseration of those lovely eyes, wakens hurriedly from his day-dream, and turning his head, finds her sympathetic gaze fixed earnestly upon him.

"Well?" says he, pulling himself together by an evident effort, and smiling interrogatively on her.

"Oh!" says she, flushing hotly; "I—it was nothing. I was only thinking that——"

"Yes?" questions he again, smiling still.

"That *you* were thinking," concludes she, very shyly, yet with a certain air of girlish audacity that is charming.

"I beg your pardon," says Mr. Crawford contritely; "you were right. I was thinking—thinking;" he pauses, and his face grows suddenly wooden; that past recollection that had been so full upon him just now returns again and strikes him dumb for the second.

"Well, so I said," returns she gently. Her voice breaks the unholy charm that binds him.

"I should beg your pardon," says he, growing all at once conventional. "I have been neglectful of you. But it is a trick I have fallen into, of brooding—brooding always——"

he checks himself and sighs profoundly. "It comes of much living alone," he says presently.

"Then you should give up solitude. I don't know where you have been before this, but for the future you must give solitude a wide berth," says she in her kind little way. "You will soon get to know us all, and then you will give up that horrid brooding."

"I seem to know you now," says Mr. Crawford in a pleased yet troubled sort of way.

"That is well; that is a beginning. You have not met Marian yet, have you—Marian Vandeleur? No? Ah, well, *she* will be of use to you. Nothing morbid can live near *her*. And you want a human tonic of some sort, don't you?"

She is feeling honestly sorry for him, is honestly anxious that means of some kind should be found, and *at once*, to lift him out of this slough of despond into which he has fallen. To her tender heart it seems terrible that he should be grieving always—always, for that lost and, presumably (for the sake of romance), false love of his.

And really, when one comes to think of it, there could have been no excuse for her. Mr. Crawford, even now, is a nice-looking person, if elderly; and twenty years ago might doubtless have been reckoned handsome. What did the girl mean?

And what constancy he has displayed! Quite something to marvel at in this present frivolous age. Poor man! So long ago, too, it must all have been, and yet he remembers it, apparently, as though it had been yesterday. What a heroic stability of purpose! He is still clinging to a romance that time has left far behind him.

"You should not think so much," says she, leaning towards him across the rustic table with what seems to him a divine compassion in her young face.

"Ah! give me a medicine for that!" says he quickly. "For thought—for the abolition of memory—that greatest curse of all!" He has spoken with evident impulsiveness, and now, as if shocked at his impulse, grows suddenly dumb.

This pretty child! this little half-grown scion of Mother Nature, with her big, interested eyes! Is she not a healing angel in herself, with her soft, gentle smile, her warm and parted lips?

"You have been unhappy?" says she very timidly, very tenderly, approaching his grief cautiously, as one might who is longing to lay a soothing finger on it, and yet scarcely daring the deed.

"Yes," says Mr. Crawford slowly, and no more. It is the baldest of replies to the most imaginative of questions.

"I can see it," says she, still full of eager desire to comfort him, and so far fascinated by his hidden, mysterious sorrow as to find it impossible to let it go by her without having a glance at it. "It"—lifting the friendliest of eyes to his—"it was a *great* trouble?"

"A great trouble," acquiesces he. And then, with a heavy breath that is almost a groan—"Such a trouble as few men, God grant, have got to endure."

He thrums absently upon the table as he says this; his face set, and with the brows drawn somewhat upward.

"Oh! I'm sorry," says she simply. Her eyes have filled with tears. With the gentlest meaning in the world she holds out her hand to him across the table, the small pink palm uppermost.

Something either in her tone, her action, or his own memories so disturbs him here that he rises abruptly, stands irresolute for a moment as if battling with some hidden demon, after which, sinking back upon the seat once more, he grasps the little kindly hand and holds it closely, as though salvation lies within those fragile fingers. He trembles visibly. A mist floods his eyes and obscures her from him. Dear heaven! what pity! what kindness! But blind—unseeing. Would there be pity or kindness if she knew? Well, she shall never know!

"It must have been a great trouble to last *all these years!*" says Evelyn with heavy emphasis and increasing pity, unconsciously clinging to her secret belief that the trouble relates to the days of his youth and has had a sweet-heart for its centre.

"It will last for ever," returns he moodily.

"Oh, no! That is folly. You should conquer such a thought as that," says the girl shaking her head reprovingly. Nevertheless she regards him with admiration. What constancy! What faithfulness! All these years, and still to feel so keenly. Ah! this is *real* love!

"What caused it—your grief, I mean?" questions she very softly still, indeed almost tremulously now; it is as

though she is approaching sacred ground. Is not love always sacred? And it is the most wonderful of all things that he should have remembered all these years. To her he is an old man, nearly as old as the colonel—only a little younger than the vicar.

At her words he has loosed her hand. Not angrily, but slowly, slowly—reluctantly, but surely, as if compelled to let her go.

“Was it,” says she very tenderly,—“was it death?”

At this he starts to his feet as though she has stung him, and turns haggard, staring eyes on hers.

“Death—death!” says he hoarsely. “What should I have to do with death? Speak—explain!”

There is something so wild, so strange, in his glance that Evelyn, a little frightened, rises too.

“I only thought,” explains she nervously, “that—that she might have died.”

“She—*she*! Who?” He looks at her frowningly, like a man awakening from a dream—a bad dream. There is relief in his whole air. Miss D’Arcy grows very red and distinctly ashamed.

“I don’t know *why* I thought it,” says she, in a low tone, lowering her eyes; “but,” nervously, “I got it into my head somehow that—that you had loved some one once, and that she—had died!”

Mr. Crawford draws his tall, lean figure to its fullest height and makes a curious gesture, as if flinging something from him. Then he laughs.

“You fancied me a heartbroken lover,” says he; “you imagined that I had once loved, and that my love had been taken from me, or had jilted me. Well, the latter fancy would have been likely enough. I am not a man whom women would care for; yet both your surmises (if you had the two) were wrong. In all my forty-five years I have never known what it is to love.”

Evelyn stares at him as if he is indeed something well worth studying. Never to have been in love! Not even once! It sounds incredible. A devout believer in Dan Cupid, though as yet she has not succumbed to his bow and arrow, Miss D’Arcy regards with curiosity the man who has during a lifetime successfully defied him. A little contempt mingles with her astonishment. And another thing—*forty-five*! Is he telling the *exact* truth, or is he stretching it a

little bit? Surely he is more than that. Quite an old man, with hair as grey as——

"Do you mean to say you have never been in love?" says she, looking at him with large distinctly disapproving eyes. "One ought to be in love *some* time during one's life."

Mr. Crawford turns, the word "never" on his lips. His eyes meet hers. The lovely childish yet earnest face, the calm lips, the expectant gaze, all are before him, and as they grow upon him the word dies upon his mouth. It is as a flash, a stroke, a revelation, an instant's work; yet none the less, sure. The word that a moment ago would have seemed to him the truth, would now be certainly a lie.

Miss D'Arcy, who is watching him, too, laughs gaily. That undercurrent of feeling that has rendered him dumb is unknown to her.

"Ah! You shrink from the answer," says she. "And quite right too. I should not have put the question."

"Perhaps not," says he. "And yet, believe me, in all my life before I came to Fenton, I never loved—I never cared for one woman beyond another. Many women I have liked—not one have I given my heart to. So far I was blessed." There is melancholy in the closing sentence.

"Tut!" says she, as if disappointed. "Then see how you have deceived me! Here have I been wasting, oh! any amount of sympathy on you, and after all, as it proves, for nothing. Do you think I shall readily forgive that?"

"I have fallen in your estimation," says Mr. Crawford. "I feel that. But would you have had me tell you anything less or more than the truth? I am not a happy man, as you may see. What should such as I have to do with a sweetheart?"

"Heretic!" says she with a pretty playfulness. "Don't you know that a sweetheart is the sovereign cure for all sorts of doleful dumps? Come, amongst the many beauties here to-day, surely I can find you a medicine for your fancied sorrows."

She has recovered all her wonted spirits. She is standing before him, smiling, beckoning him towards the opening of the tent.

"Why should I stir?" says he suddenly, following her fanciful mood, yet with deep meaning in his tone. "Can I not find my heart's ease *here*?"

He laughs nervously as if at his own temerity, and she laughs gaily in concert with him. It is a pretty joke, no more. She moves towards the open door, he following her, and here she comes face to face with Eaton Stamer.

CHAPTER X.

Miss D'Arcy is quite equal to the occasion. She looks right through him, and goes on her way without a falter. Captain Stamer, however, happens to be a person of much resource also. He steps lightly in front of her.

"I've had quite a difficulty about finding you," says he. "Ah, how d'ye do?" to Crawford. "But," gaily, "here you are at last."

Miss D'Arcy is so overcome by this audacity that words fail her.

"Been enjoying yourself?" goes on Captain Stamer, with growing geniality, unchecked by the eye she has fixed on him.

"Very much indeed, thank you," stonily.

"So glad. Rather warm day though, isn't it?" turning to walk with them.

"You have not yet told me why you are here," says Miss D'Arcy, turning at last indignant eyes to his.

"No? Haven't I? I quite thought I had. Marian gave me a message for you to the effect that she would like you to come to her for a moment, if possible. She would have come to you, only——"

"Where is she?"

"Over there, I think," pointing to where a group is gathered at the end of the tennis ground.

"Will you take me to her, Mr. Crawford?" asks Evelyn, turning to him with a smile.

"Certainly," and the three start off together towards the spot on which Miss Vandeleur is supposed to be, Captain Stamer having refused to take his dismissal. Half way there, however, a diversion occurs. From behind a clump of rhododendrons a pretty woman darts forward, and takes possession of Mr. Crawford.

"Here you are," cries Mrs. Wilding-Weekes. "And alive too! Of course I thought you were dead as you

never came to take me to see those swans. Hah! Evelyn, I expect I have *you* to thank for his defection. That's one I owe you."

"I'm extremely sorry," says Mr. Crawford composedly. "I can't think how I forgot it. I hope you will excuse me, but——"

"I always excuse everybody," says Mrs. Wilding-Weekes. "I'm bound to—they have always such a lot to excuse in me. And as there is still time for you to redeem your promise, I can't see that I have any grievance. Miss D'Arcy will let you off. Three is trumpery, you know."

She nods blithely at Evelyn; seizes upon the unwilling Crawford and hauls him off, almost literally before he has time to frame a defence.

It is a little way she has, so nobody minds her much when they have got over the first shock. Her manners are not her strong point, but her face is undeniably pretty in spite of the turned-up nose that adorns the centre of it. Her eyes are bright and sparkling: her years are few; her knowledge of mankind large and unlimited; social laws are as naught to her, and propriety as considered by the more sober section of humanity is a myth. Her husband, as will be readily understood, is an entirely secondary person in her *ménage*, and but for the bursts of jealousy that about once a week drive him into prominence he would probably be as good as dead and buried.

So far as her acquaintances go, women, except for one here and there, she vigorously refuses to cultivate, whilst in her eyes no man, however undesirable, is without his interest. Her gowns, the cut, the extraordinary variety of them, is a never-ending source of scandalous gossip amongst her set. She hunts in the season three days a week; in and out of season she flirts openly and thoroughly. Her hair is a bright red; her hands little models; need it be said she plays the banjo. Mr. Wilding-Weekes being a man of old family and large means, no one has as yet plucked up courage to cut her, though her detractors, mostly women, of course, would gladly have seen a safe way to doing so. Meanwhile she goes on her way rejoicing, careless of comment, and ever eager for the fray. She has one virtue, however—she is eminently good-natured; she has one friend too, of her own sex—Evelyn D'Arcy.

Mr. Crawford being a new man is naturally of supreme

importance in her eyes ; having impounded him, nothing is left to Evelyn but to continue her way to Marian with Stamer as sole companion.

"For once Mrs. Wilding-Weekes has done me a good turn," says that young man with a laugh.

"Yes?" with unpleasant question in the tone.

"She has sequestered Crawford—see?"

"No, I don't," immovably.

"Oh, well, I do. Horrid old bore, isn't he?"

"I think he is one of the nicest people I ever met."

"You're easily pleased then."

"There is one thing, Eaton, that may as well be said. You have forced your society upon me, and as you *compel* me to endure it I must beg you not to say uncivil things of people whom I like."

"What on earth is the matter with you?" demands Captain Stamer, turning sharply round as if to examine her features at leisure. They have entered a laurel walk and are, so long as nobody turns the corner, virtually alone. "Has he taught you to speak like that?"

"Nobody has taught me anything," says Miss D'Arcy with much spirit. "What I know I have learned from myself, and one thing my inner consciousness has evolved is, that I will let no man, or woman either" (with rising wrath), "speak to me as you have done."

"Look here," says Stamer promptly, "I know what you mean, and I know too that you have every cause to hate me; I should never have said what I did to you, even though I swear I meant nothing uncivil by it. I wouldn't annoy *you*, Evelyn. Well, I apologise; I was a brute. I will go down on my knees if you like and cry *peccavi*, only make it up with me."

At this Miss D'Arcy, who has been watching him out of the corner of her eye, after a severe struggle with her more dignified self, gives way to mirth.

"You needn't spoil your trousers for *me*," says she; "the whole matter isn't worth a yard of tweed."

"Am I to understand by that, that you——"

"Oh, yes, I forgive you," indifferently.

"Give me your hand on it," says Captain Stamer, and having secured that pretty member, he carries it to his lips and kisses it with an apparently profound gratitude.

"There, that will do," says Miss D'Arcy, shaking him off

a little coldly. "Now come, come to Marian; if indeed—" regarding him with sudden doubt, "she ever sent you to seek me."

"She did. She did, I give you my honour," declares he fervently. "You see the prizes are going to be given away, and the duchess——"

"There was no necessity to trouble me about that. The colonel could have got my prize for me."

"It appears the duchess expressed a wish to give it to you in person."

"A fig for the duchess!" says Miss D'Arcy, with very proper contempt for authority of all sorts. "Do you think I would go out of my way for ten thousand duchesses? Tut! you don't know me. I——"

But at this moment a very charming person comes round the corner, and Miss D'Arcy, who had been strong to resist a mighty array of duchesses, goes down before one lovely face.

"Ah, Marian!" cries she, running to her.

"But where have you been, Evelyn?" says Miss Vandeleur, in a little vexed way. As her vexed ways are always for the good of others, and never for the good of herself, nobody minds them. She is a tall slight girl of about three-and-twenty, with a singularly attractive face, not strictly pretty, perhaps, but very lovable and full of dignity; the lips are sweet and suggestive of repose, of strength; the forehead is broad, the whole expression gentle, but firm.

"I was coming to you," says Evelyn, "but—but Eaton tells me the duchess wants to give me my prize in person, and," nervously, "I should not like *that*, with everybody looking on, you know; it—it would be *dreadful*; couldn't," coaxingly, "couldn't the colonel get mine for me?"

"No, you must come yourself; the duchess wants to see you, to be introduced to you. You really must come, Evelyn," seeing signs of insubordination in her small friend's face. "For one thing, it will be a rudeness to refuse, and for another, she is going to have a large party at the Castle for tableaux, plays, &c., and she has asked me to stay there and she wants you to stay there also."

"Oh, well, I couldn't, there's an end of it. *I couldn't*," says Miss D'Arcy, with actual horror in her tone. "Are you mad, Marian? Why," in a whisper, this lost Eaton should hear, "I haven't a gown fit to be seen. I——"

"Forget all that for the present. You can refuse her invitation later on if you like; for the moment all you have got to do is to come up to her, take your prize, accept your invitation, and beat a dignified retreat. There," laughing, "it isn't so much after all, is it?"

"No," says Miss D'Arcy, giving in evidently, but in so heart-broken a tone that both her companions burst out laughing.

She is borne off forthwith to receive her prize, a handsome gold bracelet, and to receive also an invitation to the Castle for the following week, which she accepts, with Miss Vandeleur's eye upon her; and presently the duchess sails away, carrying her train with her, and everybody else, feeling the day to be now really at an end, make their adieux to Lady Stamer, who is looking tired and bored. The colonel and Mrs. D'Arcy have driven away by themselves in the rare old article they call a phaeton, and which would fetch any price at a fancy sale, Evelyn having declared her intention of walking home. It is a cool, pretty walk under soft green trees that intertwine their branches across the road, and one she loves to take. Eaton Stamer accompanies her to the entrance gate, and here she stops him.

"Thus far, and no farther," says she with just a little ghost of a smile. She has not yet forgiven him.

"Nonsense. I shall see you home."

"And be late for dinner, and have Lady Stamer's wrath hurled upon my head. No, thanks."

"You mean my society is not worth that. Well, it isn't. But I'll have plenty of time to take you to Firgrove and come back again to dinner."

"You really must not come," says Evelyn with a cold glance. "I prefer, I much prefer, to return home alone."

"How hard you are," says he, with a wrathful glance at her—"just like a bit of granite. I'll speak to Mr. Vaudrey about you. In my opinion you are in a bad way. People who won't forgive their neighbours are——"

"My dear girl! Is that you? Going home? I quite thought you had gone with the colonel and Mrs. D'Arcy. So fortunate. Now I shall have a companion, for your way is mine." The loud and piercing tones of Mrs. Vaudrey smite upon the air.

Captain Stamer smothers what—let us hope—is a kindly exclamation.

"Good-bye!" says he, holding out his hand to Evelyn. All hope of a *tête-à-tête* with her is now clearly at an end. "So glad you will have so delightful a companion as Mrs. Vaudrey. One would think"—to that unsuspecting lady—"that you had *known* how I longed for you. It will be quite a comfort for Evelyn to have some one to talk to on her way home."

"Oh, thanks! thanks!" says Mrs. Vaudrey vaguely. She is staring at him with all her might. "Bless me, Eaton, what's that in your hair?" says she—"just over the tip of your ear."

"*What?*" exclaims he wildly, making violent dabs at the part of his person indicated. *No* one likes to think an ear-wig or a caterpillar is nesting in one's head.

"There! it's gone," says Mrs. Vaudrey. "After all"—with a careful examination of the ground at her feet—"I believe it was only a bit of twig; but it looked so odd, and I thought it moved. One never can be sure of those insect beasts. Gave you a shock, eh?"

"I daresay I'll recover—after you have gone," says he grimly. He is again holding out his hand to Evelyn. "*Say* you forgive me," whispers he hurriedly, tightening his grasp on hers. As he is plainly filled with a determination to hold her prisoner until pardon is granted, Miss D'Arcy wisely surrenders.

"Yes," says she. It is a bald making-up, but the smile that accompanies the monosyllable more than compensates for the poorness of it.

"Until to-morrow then," says he, lifting his hat. "Good-bye, Mrs. Vaudrey; safe home. I need not wish you better company."

He beams upon that offending lady also, and with a last glance for Evelyn turns back to the house.

CHAPTER XI

"WELL—it went off very well, didn't it?" says Mrs. Vaudrey, stepping out smartly beside Evelyn; one end of her gown is dragging gaily in the dust beside her, but that's nothing here nor there where Mrs. Vaudrey is concerned.

"It was a *lovely* day," says Evelyn, whose spirits have

risen unaccountably during the last three minutes. Can it be Mrs. Vaudrey's society that has had this desired effect? Perhaps it was the triumph of having conquered Eaton's determination to go home with her—perhaps it is the Christian satisfaction she ought to feel at having at last forgiven him.

"Well, so-so," says Mrs. Vaudrey, as if hardly pleased at the answer received. "There was a moment when I felt certain we were going to have a shower." It is quite plain that the shower would have received a hearty welcome from one of the guests at all events.

"Oh, I'm glad it kept off. Everything was as near to perfection as it could be."

"It was smart, very smart; to do Bessie Stamer justice she certainly *grudges* nothing—that is to her own aggrandizement. And of course she can do things as she likes. No stint, you know; and everything in her own hands. Ha! ha!" with hollow mirth. "I always laugh when I think what a cipher Sir Bertram is. We all speak of his mother's entertainments, whereas in reality they are his."

"He is certainly a very good son," says Evelyn cautiously, who has been over the ground before.

"He's a fool!" says Mrs. Vaudrey with a truly noble disregard of subterfuge. "She gets all the praise, and *he* pays the piper! If he married now——" long pause, filled with hopeful imaginings—"what a change it would be for her. I hope"—with a sudden eagerness that carries her on a yard or two with great speed—"that when he *does* marry, his wife will prove a virago!"

"Oh! Poor Sir Bertram," says Evelyn a little startled; "what on earth has he done to you?"

"Nothing! nothing. I wish him no harm. But I hope I shall live to see a mistress at Parklands who will be a match for Bessie. I've known her all my life, as girl and woman, and she wants—well, to be treated as she treats others. Not another word about her, my dear," as though Evelyn has been abusing her unrighteously. "It isn't right that a girl like you should nourish vindictive feelings. Did you see her gown, dear? Handsome, eh?"

"I thought it beautiful," says Evelyn absently. Her mind has flown indeed to other scenes.

"Fifty pounds, if it cost a penny. But too young for her. Did you mark that, Evelyn? Twenty years too young. A

girl might have worn it ! Absurd in a woman of her age to deck herself out like that. And have you noticed ? a young gown on an *old* woman (and Bessie's old if you like) only makes her seem more than her age. Didn't you think she looked specially worn—done up—eh ? ”

“ I didn't look at her,” says Evelyn, who indeed seldom studies Lady Stamer's features.

“ Well, she did ; older than she is, though she is fifty-five if a *day* ; she may pose as forty, if she likes, but who is going to believe her ? And at all events,” cheerfully, “ she can't *look* it, though she may say it. She is ten years older than I am, though you wouldn't think it, eh ? ”

“ I would,” says Evelyn honestly ; and indeed Mrs. Vaudrey, badly gowned and all as she is, does look considerably Lady Stamer's junior.

“ No—would you really ? ” says that matron, much gratified. “ Well, perhaps there *are* people who wear worse. I must say you looked nice to-day, if you like ”—this is a delicate return compliment. “ I could see the duchess took a tremendous fancy to you, which was by no means agreeable to my Lady Stamer.”

“ I don't see why she need care,” with a slight frown.

“ That's just it. It's no affair of hers, yet she *must* interfere. It's all jealousy, my dear, and something else, too, in your case. She is *afraid* of you, my dear.”

“ Of me ? of me ? Nonsense ! ”

“ There, there, so be it, as they say at the end of the prayers. But I have my own thoughts, for all that. The duchess was civil to me too, didn't you think ? But then her family and ours are old friends ; you know all about that, don't you ? ”

“ Yes—all—everything,” declares Miss D'Arcy with the vehemence of despair, yet hardly hoping thereby to stem the torrent. Nevertheless this time she escapes a rehearsal of the relations that once existed between the Saintons and her grace. Mrs. Vaudrey, providentially, has let that thing she is pleased to call her mind run upon more immediate matters.

“ Bessie's face was a picture when she came up and found me receiving her 'august guest'—that's what she calls her, I'll be bound. Did you see her ? Ha—ha—ha ! ” There is genuine, if malicious, mirth in her note this time. “ She was *green*. The duchess disapproved of her gown ; I could

see that at a glance. Altogether too juvenile. But poor Bessie never could understand the date called *yesterday*. Thinks herself always young and beautiful; she's *hideous*, to my eyes. That hooked nose of hers would condemn her anywhere."

"She could never have been even good-looking," says Evelyn with conviction, to whom, as we know, Lady Stamer is abhorrent.

"No, neither bodily nor mentally. And to see her strutting about in that gown. Well! One shouldn't talk about it; any one listening—except you, my dear, who know me—might think I was jealous of it. But as for me——. However, one can't help thinking how fortunate she is. Look at my gown, now, for example, such a contrast to hers, yet I am better born than ever she was. "This"—pulling out the ancient skirt with a vigour that makes Evelyn shudder for the duration of it—"is its fourth summer; it has been dyed once, turned twice. And not so bad after all, is it?"

She pauses here with such a triumphant air, that Miss D'Arcy has not the heart to refrain from lying.

"It looks very nice," says she.

"It is wonderful—really quite a grand old skirt, I call it, after Gladstone, don't you know. It has stood to me, in season and out of it. Nothing like getting a *good* material when you are about it."

"It is economy," says Evelyn, "only somehow we never have the money to get the good material."

"Well, I don't suppose I ever shall again," says Mrs. Vaudrey, "now the children are getting so big. But, however, *this*"—touching the heirloom again—"will last me for a good bit yet on high days and holidays. But it does seem hard, doesn't it, that Bessie should have so many good gowns when I have only one? And I wouldn't care about that either if she wasn't so——. Good gracious!"—breaking off suddenly—"what a vindictive eye she has. A key to the soul, my dear. Between you and me," pushing her hand through Evelyn's arm and speaking in a tragic whisper—"she's a *snake*!"

"Oh, no," says Evelyn.

"Yes, she is. She's a snake. Who should know her if I didn't? She 'smiles and smiles, and is at heart a villain.'" She makes this remarkable assertion triumphantly, being

evidently under the impression that she is quoting Shakespeare correctly.

"I don't really think she is as bad as that," says Evelyn, rather startled.

"She is though. She is a regular snake in the grass! As if I didn't understand her! I *should*. She is my worst enemy; yet I have done that woman ever so many good turns from time to time—long ago, I mean, when she, the squire's daughter, was glad to know the daughter of a baron. Not that I boast, Evelyn. I should hope I'm above *that* sort of thing. But it *is* galling, you know."

"It is, I suppose," says Evelyn, with deep sympathy.

"One would think I was the last person in the world she feels envy about, but it seems it is not so. She envies me my influence in the village; she envies me my old women, who, goodness knows, aren't worth that or anything else, ungrateful old wretches! She would undermine me if she could. See how she acted the other day about that coal fund."

"She acted abominably," says Miss D'Arcy, who is a partizan of the first water, and besides has wrongs of her own to remember.

"It seems impossible that she should grudge me the little I have got. She, who has everything in the world—position, money, and good sons, too, though I don't like Sir Bertram's eye—*knowing*, I call it—and what have I got? Only the children, and the old parishioners, and—well, yes," as if admitting something against her better judgment, "Reginald, of course."

Reginald is Mr. Vaudrey.

"You could have no better possession than Mr. Vaudrey," cries Evelyn quickly.

"Yes, my dear," placidly; "I quite agree with you. But he's poor, you know. He," thoughtfully, "is the poorest person I know. We never have a penny we can squander *comfortably*, like other people, and that's a great drawback, you know. One likes to squander occasionally. It is in the blood. But squandering and we, are two."

"Yes, that's the way with us, too," says Evelyn, shaking her charming head with quite a melancholy air.

"And how different it is with her—Bessie Stamer, I mean. Of course she comes of a good family. No one is saying a word against that. County people they were. The

Daintrys, you know, of Warwick. But—well, one shouldn't talk of it."

"Why not?" says Evelyn, with commendable courage, knowing Mrs. Vaudrey will talk of it, in spite of her words to the contrary. "You mean that your father——"

"Just so, my dear. She was a commoner—I was not. But my father, Lord Sainton, hadn't a *son*. He was, I remember, delighted when Mr. Vaudrey proposed to me. One off his shoulders, don't you see? A mouth less to feed and clothe."

"And you—was it to oblige your father that you married Mr. Vaudrey?" asks Evelyn, a touch of indignation in her tone.

"N—o, my dear. Honestly, I think not. It seems absurd, now, Evelyn, doesn't it? but really I believe there was a time when I was dreadfully in love with Mr. Vaudrey."

"I should think you would be dreadfully in love with him now, too," says Evelyn, with a slight increase of the indignation.

"Oh, well—as to that!" says Mrs. Vaudrey with a most unromantic laugh. "There—you mightn't think it," says she, as if starting a regular problem, difficult of solution, "but there was a time when I used to think Reginald was absolutely *handsome*!" Poor Reginald! Years and worries, and frettings over his destitutes, have left him far from handsome now, save in the eyes of those who can appreciate him. It angers Evelyn that his nearest and dearest should take him thus baldly, but after all no man is a prophet in his own country.

"He has a beautiful face always," says she, with a little lump in her throat, as she sees rise before her mind's eye the vicar's pale, eager, emaciated features; his great unworldly eyes, his stoop, the unsatisfied longings that life has left so clearly stamped upon him.

"There are uglier, certainly," says Mrs. Vaudrey, pursing up her lips, as if with a desire to give him and all men fair play.

"He is the best man in the world," says Evelyn vehemently.

"He is," agrees his wife, placidly. "*Too* good. I wish," with a heartfelt sigh, "he had a little less goodness, and a little more coin of the realm."

"You can't mean that," says Evelyn, who after all is *very* young.

"*Can't I?*" with deep feeling. "I do, though. And I wish he had a little more common sense into the bargain. I don't mind talking to you, Evelyn—you are one of the most reasonable girls I know, though you *are* good-looking, and I say that if you were in my shoes you would wish Mr. Vaudrey different too. He is a saint, if you like, but one fares *lenten-wise* all the year round when attached to that class, and one tires of bread without butter *always*. Why can't he think? Is to-morrow of no consequence? Surely he needn't give *all* to the poor."

"Not all, of course."

"No. Even Abraham did not go so far as that. A little of all that he possessed satisfied *him*. But Mr. Vaudrey wants to out-Cæsar Cæsar. Now look here, Evelyn! You will admit, I suppose, that every gentleman must have at least two suits of clothes."

"At the least."

"One suit for Sundays, and one for weekdays. Well, that is just what I can't make Mr. Vaudrey take to heart. Up comes one of the parishioners—old Hodgson for choice if you like—complaining of his eternal sciatica or lumbago, or whatever ridiculous disorder may be rife in the parish at the time; and on the instant Mr. Vaudrey falls a victim to his wiles, and gives him, without a thought, his second best breeches. After that, of what use is the second best coat and waistcoat, I want to know? Of none—of none at all, and nothing therefore is left him but to give his Sunday suit to his Monday's work. That's imperative, Evelyn. You know a man can't go visiting all over the parish in a coat and waistcoat only."

"No! no," says Evelyn regretfully. She is evidently seriously annoyed with the present state of our moral laws. A coat and waistcoat *only*! No, they would never sanction that. She is troubled too with an awful inward vision of her pastor and master, careering wildly down the village street, clad in the scanty habiliments Mrs. Vaudrey has so graphically pictured. Would the children hunt him? the dogs? It is a terrible bit of imagery! She pales before it.

"Oh! he ought *not* to give away his trousers," says she, almost tearfully.

"I knew you would see it as I do," returns Mrs. Vaudrey, well pleased. "But he's a fool, my dear—Reginald is a regular fool. One would think he was a millionaire the

way he goes on. Yet he never has a decent rag to his back, and not an ounce of flesh on his bones."

"He does look thin," says Miss D'Arcy, calling up the vicar's cadaverous face. "Does he," falteringly—"does he *eat* enough? Has he a good appetite?"

"Enormous!" says Mrs. Vaudrey with considerable energy. "He eats like a trooper. More than I do with all the children thrown in. There again, my dear Evelyn, you can see how expensive it is to marry a really good man. If he would doze away an hour or two of his day in his study, pretending to write his sermons, you know, or studying the Ancient Fathers, a *mild* luncheon might satisfy him, but all that trudging through the keen air from morning till night, to see how his poor are getting on, gives him an appetite before which an alderman might quail."

Evelyn sighs, with a sense of relief.

"Why didn't he come to Parklands to-day?" asks she.

CHAPTER XII.

"My dear girl, *need* you ask? Old Betty Whinsdale has a touch of the 'rheumatics', and wanted a prayer said over her. As a *charm*, believe me; but of course Mr. Vaudrey thinks it was an excess of religion on her part, and so he has given his day to her. Besides, he wasn't fit to be seen. Martin Tweedy got the second-best trousers last Sunday week, and now Reginald's best clothes aren't good enough for a duchess! Besides—between you and me and the wall—he doesn't like Bessie."

"Surely, surely," indignantly, "she could not have been rude to *him*."

"Couldn't she? That's all *you* know about it. Now I know very well all Mr. Vaudrey's faults, but I tell you this, Evelyn," a deep red mounting to her brow, "that the person who could wilfully say a word to wound him, must be essentially *bad*. He wouldn't tell me about it, but I found it out. It was about his early celebrations. You know how he takes to heart any little sneer about that part of his ministry, and Lady Stamer no doubt knows it too; anyhow she offended him. I suppose," bitterly, "she wanted to get rid of him; he was not well dressed enough for her

dinner-parties. His evening suit is shabby, I know, and where on earth is he to get seven guineas to buy another? Besides, he was always asking her for money for his charities, and she hates giving. But it was his shabbiness above all things that annoyed her. She—— I declare to you, Evelyn,” breaking off suddenly to seize her companion’s arm, and walking her almost into a run in her excitement, “there are moments when I wish I was Lucrezia Borgia or some such enterprising person, that I might poison that woman.”

“I don’t see what you would gain by it,” says Evelyn, who is fast getting out of breath.

“Don’t you? I’d gain the loss of her, for one thing. However,” with pious hope in tone and look, “she can’t have it all her own way *for ever*. The time will come when she will find she is not as clever as she thinks. She’ll be foiled sooner or later. For one thing,” with a glance at Evelyn, “I don’t believe that pet scheme of hers will come off.”

“What scheme?” indifferently.

“As if you didn’t know,” says Mrs. Vaudrey, giving her a playful, if somewhat hurtful, dig in the ribs.

“Well, I don’t!” says Miss D’Arcy rather shortly. Nobody likes a severe pain in the side.

“What! Not about Marian Vandeleur?”

“About Marian?”

“Who else, in Heaven’s name? She’s the only one round here with a penny to her fortune.”

“I’m still all abroad,” says Evelyn, throwing out her pretty hands expressively.

“You mean to tell me honestly that you didn’t *know*?” exclaims Mrs. Vaudrey, coming to a sudden standstill, and reading the girl’s face as though she would compel the truth to lie there in open print.

“I think I’ve been telling you that, for the past five minutes,” says Evelyn a little impatiently.

“Then you are the one ignorant person in Fenton. All the world knows that she has set her heart on marrying Eaton to Marian Vandeleur!”

There is a slight pause, whilst the girl, who has come to a standstill too, gazes into the woman’s eyes.

“Oh, no! Oh, that is ridiculous! That will never be,” says Evelyn at last, with a curious, thoughtless vehemence.

"That's what I say. It will never be. She won't be able to manage *that*—eh?" with a meaning side glance at her companion, that is completely thrown away.

"And yet—why not?" says the girl very slowly, and with an expression on her face as though she is looking inward and backward on her life's short journey. "Why should they *not* marry? It would be a good match for both. Marian is the dearest girl I know, and Eaton——" the pause is eloquent. "He would suit her—I think—perhaps."

"Perhaps!" says Mrs. Vaudrey drily, giving her a shrewd glance. "What a hypocrite you are, Evelyn! Of course I know girls are never honest about these things, but to me, an old friend—I——"

"What things?"

"Oh, there! If you won't you won't, you know. But that one should be all at once deaf, and dumb, and blind, is asking a good deal. However, no matter. The principal thing is, that you agree with me, that Bessie will be frustrated in this one matter at least. Here's the stile, my dear. Here we part. It is my short cut to the Vicarage. As for you, you haven't a dozen more yards to go."

"Even if I had I should enjoy it—the evening is so lovely," says Evelyn. "Good-bye. Give my love to the vicar and to the children, and send up the two young ones to see us to-morrow, if you can manage it."

"I'll be delighted to manage it," says Mrs. Vaudrey cheerfully. "And it is always such a treat to them to go to you."

She kisses Evelyn, steps lightly on to the stile, poises on the top step a moment, turns to say a last airy word, and overbalancing her portly frame comes with an undesirable speed to the grass on the other side.

"Oh! are you *hurt*?" cries Evelyn in an agony.

"Not a bit—not a bit!" exclaims she, scrambling to her feet once more. "But my good gown, my dear"—making anxious examination of it over her shoulders at the imminent risk of giving herself a lasting crick in her neck—"what of it? Not spoiled, eh?"

"Not a soil," says Evelyn. "It is as good as ever it was," which, after all, isn't saying much for it.

Mrs. Vaudrey, comforted, however, goes on her way rejoicing, with a last buoyant wave of her hand.

Evelyn, having watched her cross the next field—with the beloved skirts so high upheld as to show a considerable amount of ankles of truly noble proportions—and tackle the second stile without further mishap, resumes her own way.

As she does so, a quick sigh escapes her. She is conscious too of a feeling of irritation difficult of suppression. What had Mrs. Vaudrey meant by calling her a hypocrite? What had she to do with the failure or success of Lady Stamer's scheme for her son's aggrandizement? If she thought—she checks herself here, and an angry, offended blush dyes her face. Why should she have thought it? Why should any one dare to think it? What was Eaton to her but an old friend—a brother almost? But Mrs. Vaudrey, in spite of her undeniable good birth, was always a little odd—a little *vulgar*. Nobody should mind anything she said. And after all, what did it matter?

Her cheeks are still very hot, however, when just at her own gate she meets the vicar, swinging along in that strange loose way of his, with his chin in the air, and his eyes dreaming—of heaven, perhaps.

"You—you, my dear—*you!*" says he, in the queer confused way natural to him, and that is always so suggestive of a person just roused from some engrossing thoughts.

"Yes. I am only now returning from the garden-party at Parklands," says she, smiling at him. "You were not there?"

"No, no. I could not manage it," says the vicar, patting the little hand he holds. "It was pleasant? You enjoyed yourself? Ah, right—right. Pleasure is always for the young."

"It is for you too—if you would have it," says she almost reproachfully.

"Why, so I do have it," says he, as if surprised at her words. "I am specially happy to-day, for example, though I did not go to Lady Stamer's *fête*. You know old Betty Whinsdale? Well, then, you know too how hard she is to—to influence; but to-day——" he stops, and looks at Evelyn with an almost eager light in his large eyes—"to-day, I think she *felt*—at last," says he, with a long sigh of thankfulness.

It is quite impossible for Evelyn, who knows the man—and Betty—not to wonder secretly what he has given

the old woman to-day, Betty's pieties being lax or strong according to the value of the gifts bestowed. With that last conversation with Mrs. Vaudrey still fresh within her mind, she is conscious of casting a furtive glance at his clothing, and it is with a positive feeling of relief that she sees that all his garments are upon him.

"That has made you happy," says she softly. Not for worlds would she have cast a doubt on Betty's purity of purpose.

"That, and other things. I went from her to Hodgson's, and there—found a regular transformation scene. You know who has been at work in this parish of late, don't you, Evelyn? You know Mr. Crawford?"

"Yes. Is it he——"

"He is a good man," says the vicar, interrupting her with some glad excitement. "He is indeed a Christian, both in thought and act. His charity is unbounded. Those people were reduced to the verge of starvation—all I could do for them would not have staved off the evil hour much longer—when he, Mr. Crawford, came to the rescue. Without a word to any man he set them up again. I was never so astonished as when I arrived at their miserable home. I—I confess to you, my dear girl, that it was with lagging steps I drew near to it, for I hadn't a penny in my pocket, and what words, even if taken from sacred writ, can comfort the poor soul whose stomach is empty? Well, when I entered, there was the fire burning, a pot boiling on it, out of which came a goodly steam—a *handsome* one, I can tell you," says the vicar, with an irrepressible laugh, "and the children all clustered round the fire, in happy expectation, and the mother, poor creature, looking ten years younger. 'Who had done it?' I asked. 'Mr. Crawford!' And all through a word of mine let fall to him last week. He has taken on Hodgson, too, at regular wages, and is giving him work suited to his weak state of health. Truly," says Mr. Vaudrey, the tears rising in his eyes, "God did well when he made Crawford wealthy."

"Oh how good it was of him! I cannot tell you how I like him," says Evelyn with a little burst of enthusiasm.

"He has a heart above the average. He not only gives, but he loves giving. He is such a help to me as I never hoped to find. Sir Bertram is very good, but he doesn't enter *into it* with me. *This* man has sympathy," says the

poor vicar gratefully, thinking of all the years he has toiled during which no man cared whether he gained a soul or lost it. "He has the true spirit. He gives with both hands, and with all his heart. He seems to *long* to give."

"I know," says Evelyn. "Once or twice it has occurred to me that he must have some reason for his great generosity towards the poor and suffering. Could he ever have been poor himself—and wanted help and love?"

"I don't know. That idea didn't suggest itself to me. But rather that perhaps some one belonging to him—his father, it might be—had committed some wrong, and he was trying to expiate it. As for himself, I believe he is incapable of wronging any one."

"Quite," says Evelyn with conviction. "His face is both gentle and sad. Mr. Vaudrey, did you ever see so sad a face? He makes me always feel so dreadfully sorry for him. And if he is expiating the sins of others, how dear of him. How few men care for anything that doesn't concern themselves."

"Well, it is all mere surmise," says the vicar. "And why should we not believe that his unbounded charities arise from nothing but a sincere desire to follow the steps of his Redeemer? I *must* think he loves the poor, so zealous is he for their welfare. Those Meesons, now—he asked me about them, and now, thanks to him, they too are in a fair way towards prosperity, and that boy of theirs recovering rapidly."

"Tom Meeson?"

"Yes. We thought there was no hope. But Mr. Crawford, when he had been to see him once or twice, did not agree with me. It appears he has dabbled in medicine. And he would not hear of having the dispensary doctor. He sent the whole way to Darlton for Jones—you know how successful Jones is; and indeed he has done wonders for Tom."

"His coming here has been a great comfort to you," says Evelyn, looking with pleasure at the vicar's brilliant eyes, now so full of gladness. His worn face is lighted up; his whole person seems to have taken on a new sense of satisfaction and certain hope for the future. It is characteristic of the man that all this new-found delight is not for himself but for his poor.

"It is the relief," says he simply. "The freedom from

care. The knowledge that there is some one I can rely upon to help me, when times are bad. Yes, Crawford is a good man, and an honest friend to the poor. He not only desires to help them, but he *feels* for them. Good-bye, my dear. God bless you! I'm in a hurry home. To confess the truth to you, I'm starving with hunger."

Here he laughs gaily, and swings away down the road, to stop a moment after to call back to her: "Your father? your mother? quite well, I hope?"

Years have not compelled him to remember that the colonel is only her uncle and Mrs. D'Arcy her aunt.

"Quite well, thank you," returns Evelyn with a little nod. Then he turns the corner and is gone.

CHAPTER XIII.

It is the next morning, and Lady Stamer's day at home. She has consented to sacrifice one day in the week to her acquaintances, but woe and betide those, who, coming to her on that special afternoon, are considered by her outside the pale of society. Just at first the doctor's wife and the country attorney's had ventured to present themselves on the day on which she has declared herself ready and willing to receive all visitors. They came once—they came never again. Lady Stamer in one lesson gave them their level—in plain language she taught them in a single interview how altogether beneath notice they were, and how many fathoms deep they lay under that delectable social circle of which she reigned the queen. To achieve this she had to be excessively rude, which, of course, considering her birth, must, or at all events ought, to have been abhorrent to her. She must have had a strong mind, however, as she betrayed no symptoms of remorse, then, or afterwards.

In Fenton she was in effect the ruler of society, as there was no resident lord within forty miles of it; and the one or two other baronets who had places in the neighbourhood were by no means so well off as Sir Bertram.

In the beginning, after his father's death, she had affected to withdraw from all supervision of the household, but a word from Sir Bertram had been sufficient to reinstate her in all her old privileges. As a fact she now ruled Parklands

with a rod of iron—the very owner of it coming sometimes beneath the despotic government that was detested by all who lived beneath it.

The owner of this lovely estate was, however—odd to say—the favourite with his mother. For Eaton, the second son, she had hardly ever felt those maternal pangs that as a rule accompany such love. When the latter was born she felt he was one too many. Her ambition was her strongest point, and having contracted an heir to Parklands, she had felt that anything further was worse than useless—was in effect a drain upon the resources that should have gone in their entirety to feed the fortunes of the future master of the place. It was fortunate that no other children blessed, or as she would have thought marred, her married lot; the small amount of attention she bestowed upon her second child would probably have lessened into absolute neglect of a third or fourth. She was indeed one of those many women whom nature meant to be childless; she had neither the love to give them nor the knowledge that such love should be given. But nature sometimes is at fault.

By this time the morning has deepened into noon. It is well into June now, and all the loveliest flowers of England are blooming in the pretty beds that Lady Stamer has had laid out beneath the drawing-room windows. These glowing flowers are even the lovelier because of the growth of their later sisters beside them—the now half-budding plants that in the near July will send their fragrance up to heaven. It is as though we have now before us, clasped together, the life that is almost over and the life to come. Despair and hope in one breath!

“Yes, I think the duchess *was* pleased,” says Lady Stamer complacently, with a sort of after-glow that heightens her smile and her colour, but which she fondly believes is unknown to any one. “It was so perfect a day.”

“Not a hitch,” says Mrs. Vaudrey, who has dropped in, and who, however martial behind her back, shows only a smothered hostility when in presence of Lady Stamer—unless indeed occasion calls for combat.

“I meant the weather,” says Lady Stamer. She stares at Mrs. Vaudrey through the long-handled *pince-nez* that hangs by her side.

“Well, there’s often a hitch in the weather,” says Mrs. Vaudrey aggressively.

"Everybody played very well, I thought," says Miss Vandeleur pleasantly, as though with a desire to put an end to the hostilities, that are already in a fair way to make open war.

"Especially Miss D'Arcy," says Bartholomew Blount who unfortunately is present. If he is the possessor of any talent, it is that of always saying the right thing in the wrong place.

"A little wild goat like that would be sure to play well," says Lady Stamer with the keenest contempt.

"And what do you say to Lady Flora Grant?" asks Miss Vandeleur good-humouredly. "*She* cannot certainly be called wild in any sense of the word, and yet she plays if possible better than Evelyn."

"Hardly better," says Captain Stamer, who is handing a cup of tea to Marian at the moment.

"Ah! you are a partizan," says she in a low tone, glancing up at him with a smile. He shakes his head, lifts his brows as if in repudiation of the idea, yet looks distinctly pleased nevertheless. Her championship of Evelyn at the desired moment has perhaps made him feel, if possible, more friendly towards her. Poor Evelyn, whose little unconventional ways are so often under discussion.

He is a slightly-built young man, of good height, with his head well set upon his shoulders. There is nothing very special about him, and yet there is hardly an acquaintance of his who has not what is called "a good word" for him. Some little virtue he has about him that renders him popular with most people—geniality might explain it, but genuineness would be nearer still. He is liked because men feel that when he betrays a liking for them he thoroughly means it. He has a kindly face, open eyes, a hearty laugh—all sure passports to favour. No one could call him a beauty, but on the other hand no one would certainly ever call him anything but a gentleman.

"The duchess's house-party threatens to be rather a medley," says Lady Stamer, addressing a Mrs. Coventry, the wife of a neighbouring squire, who has just dropped in. As Miss Coventry has been one of those invited to spend the coming week at the Castle, her mother does not take this with a smiling face.

"You mean——?" says she, hesitating purposely, and looking at Lady Stamer through half-closed lids.

"That all sorts and conditions of people have been bidden," says Lady Stamer, who is ignorant of Miss Coventry's invitation.

"That is a rather pronounced assertion, don't you think?" says her visitor with a cold smile. "You of course object to somebody who has been asked?"

"To several," says Lady Stamer, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"The duchess *will* be sorry, if she hears it," says Mrs. Vaudrey with a light laugh; in which, after the faintest hesitation, Mrs. Coventry joins. The latter is a woman of proportions so ample that one wonders how she has so bitter a tongue.

"The duchess probably will hear it," says Lady Stamer, looking at Mrs. Vaudrey. "And I can only hope so. It will help her to make no such foolish mistakes when next she comes to this county. I hear that little D'Arcy girl is one of the fortunate ones invited to this motley gathering."

"Yes," says Miss Vandeleur gently. "I was glad about that. It will be such a change for her."

"A change indeed," says Lady Stamer, with a low, insolent laugh. "Eaton, Marian perhaps will take some more tea."

"I'm getting her some," says Sir Bertram. He is always so silent a man that as a rule everybody looks at him when he does speak. He is a good deal older than his brother, who is just twenty-seven, and is so tall, and so broad in proportion, as to command immediate attention into whatsoever room he may enter.

"Colonel D'Arcy is charming," says Mrs. Coventry; "I cannot think why it is that people so run down his daughter."

"His niece," corrects Mrs. Vaudrey.

"Ah! is it so? I always thought she was his daughter."

"They intend you to think so," says Lady Stamer meaningly. "It is evident that they all wish she never *had* had a father."

"Oh, I see—something unpleasant, eh?"

"Very, I should say. If you even mention the word 'father' before the girl, they all redden up, and throw out signs of confusion. Very unpleasant, I should call it. Forgery, I should imagine, or some low crime like that."

"Surely this is also what Mrs. Coventry has just now

called a 'rather pronounced assertion,' " says Mrs. Vaudrey. " Evelyn's father may have been a failure, without being exactly a criminal."

" He may ? " says Lady Stamer, turning aside to adjust the rose in the glass near her, and succeeding in giving everybody present the impression that Mrs. Vaudrey is a person not worth arguing with. Mrs. Vaudrey, driven to forget her politics by this touch of insolence, comes boldly to the front.

" I think Evelyn D'Arcy as charming a girl as I know," says she, with a determination that makes her voice over-loud.

" Marian will take that as a compliment," says Lady Stamer, smiling.

" I do, indeed," says Miss Vandeleur, in her gentle, dignified way. " I, too, think Evelyn very charming."

" Charity is your forte, my dear Marian. No doubt you will have your reward hereafter. I must say, in espousing the cause you have now in hand, you are earning it honestly. For my part, what any one can see in that little, wild, untutored creature is more than I can imagine. *Such manners !* "

" Very pretty manners, surely," says Miss Vandeleur.

" By pretty, I presume you mean amusing," says Lady Stamer. " Now-a-days, everything is given up to the clowns of society ; we bow down before them. ' Make me laugh and I will place you on a pedestal,' is the cry. Good manners, respectability—all give place to this insane desire for amusement. To *my* thinking—old-fashioned, no doubt—it seems a pity that some one does not take that girl in hand and re-model her all through."

" That would be a pity indeed," says Marian, as gently as ever. " She has the charm of being quite natural. I hope no one will try to chain her down to bald conventionalities. Such a little, lovely wild-flower as she is, with such a good heart ! She feels for all the world. As for her manners, we speak of her as unconventional, but surely yesterday, when she was accepting the duchess's invitation, her words, her air were perfect."

" You should have been a man, Marian, and a philanthropist, you would have made excellent speeches," says Lady Stamer, without acidity. The young mistress of Riversdale is a person to be cultivated, encouraged—

annexed, if possible. To make her the wife of her second son, Eaton, is at present Lady Stamer's strongest desire; Mrs. Vaudrey had not been romancing when she gave Evelyn D'Arcy a hint of this. Had either Marian or Sir Bertram betrayed any liking for each other, Lady Stamer would willingly have given all her energies to the furtherance of a marriage between *them*. But Sir Bertram, beyond a common civility, has been to Marian as he has been to all the world since his coming of age, and Marian of late has been almost cold to him.

"A philanthropist, Marian, is a person who looks down on everybody else, and makes himself whilst on earth very unusually unpleasant to all his neighbours. He generally lives long, and is very little regretted. The nation, on his death, raises a hideous monument to his memory as a token of gratitude to the Heaven who has removed him. That's a speech, if you like," says Mr. Blount, nodding triumphantly at Lady Stamer, his aunt. He is perhaps the one person in the world who finds in Lady Stamer a large fund of amusement. He is also, perhaps, the one person in the world whose quips and cranks do not annoy her.

"In spite of Bartholomew's eloquence, a philanthropist's is a noble cast," says Lady Stamer, as if following out her argument with Marian; "but one sometimes productive of little good, as in this case, my dear Marian. You *may* blind yourself, you cannot hope to blind all the world."

"If I'm to be considered part of the world, I confess I'm blind, too," says Mrs. Vaudrey, who is plainly now in an antagonistic spirit. To please Lady Stamer is generally her object when setting forth to pay a visit to her, but this noble determination wanes and waxes feeble towards the termination of it. "I think that child delicious."

"Ah!" says Lady Stamer, with a peculiar air. She utters this eloquent monosyllable with a sigh of deepest meaning; it conveys to her listeners the knowledge that, so far as she can judge, Mrs. Vaudrey's opinion is beneath notice.

"You don't agree with me?" says Mrs. Vaudrey, who, when at close quarters, is not afraid of her, having a courage of her own. She even manages a smile, so maddened is she by the other's impertinence.

"No," says Lady Stamer, in a stolid tone that admits of no compromise.

"Good heavens! we are in for it. Any short cut anywhere?" asks Mr. Blount, appealing to Sir Bertram in a low tone full of heartfelt despair. Eaton, who is standing near his brother, answers for him.

"Not one," says he ruthlessly. "We are all going to see this matter through. *Hush!* the opposition is making itself heard."

And, indeed, Mrs. Vaudrey is doing her best.

"How strange it is," says she, with an awful sweetness, "that some people never can get accustomed to change—the inevitable change that makes life bearable. A certain groove catches them, and holds them prisoners for ever. They have known such and such people all their lives, and therefore cannot believe that such and such *other* people may have their place upon the same earth as theirs. I state an extreme case, but extreme cases are to be found. But that one should find an example in you, dear Lady Stamer, is indeed a blow."

All this is delivered with peculiar sweetness.

"I hope it won't shatter you," says Lady Stamer, with a benevolence that reduces Mrs. Vaudrey's effort in that line to the level of ordinary good nature.

Mrs. Coventry, who had been talking to Eaton Stamer, but who is now unattached, leans back in her fauteuil and laughs aloud.

"What I meant," says Mrs. Vaudrey, whose anger is now red hot, "was that I should have thought you more liberal than to be the foe of a little girl like Evelyn. You may not like her, but you might at least condone her faults, if she has any. That you should publicly condemn her has shocked me; I confess I expected better things from you."

"Yes?" says Lady Stamer unmoved. "You are hopeful. Now there are people of whom *I never* expect anything."

"The colonel, at all events, is a jolly old soul—like old King Cole," interposes Mr. Blount, who is great in nursery rhymes, and who is wise enough to be aware that there are breakers ahead. He says this with the kindly intention of leading the conversation into safer waters. It is a *truly* self-sacrificing effort on his part, as a fracas is dear to his soul, and here seems as pretty an opening as one need desire for a brisk and lively fray. He is indeed only led into these peaceable paths because of the sudden anxious light that has shown itself in Eaton's eyes. He crushes his longings,

therefore, but all to no purpose. In spite of him, he has his reward for his self-denial.

"Colonel D'Arcy is an Irishman," says Lady Stamer; she might have spoken volumes, and yet said less. Her disgust is apparent to everybody.

"Well, what of that?" says Mrs. Coventry, settling herself more squarely in her chair. Her mother was an Irishwoman of very old family, and Mrs. Coventry was not now going to be ashamed of her. She, in fact, prided herself on the fact that she had Celtic blood in her veins. Two or three of the young Coventrys have given signs of genius, and this has all been accredited to their maternal grandmother.

"You must really excuse me from going into it," says Lady Stamer in a bored tone. She draws a little gold-topped scent bottle towards her, and unscrewing the stopper sniffs at it plaintively.

"Oh! how shockingly illiberal," cries Mrs. Vaudrey, with a playfulness that is only skin deep. "Now, as for me, I adore the poor dear Irish. I think them delightful. So fresh, don't you know, so inconsequent, so out-at-elbows——"

"Oh, it isn't that," says Lady Stamer, with a lazy movement of her fan. "If that was all, one might condone their faults. One is accustomed to that sort of thing. One has to put up with it perpetually. I assure you, my dear Mrs. Vaudrey, that they are not the *only* people I know who are 'out-at-elbows,' as you so—er—so very *feelingly* describe it."

Every one in the room regards this as being unpardonable, the Vaudreys being notoriously hard up, without the remotest chance of ever being less so. A faint pink tinge creeps into Mrs. Vaudrey's sallow cheek, and Eaton Stamer seeing it, loses his temper.

CHAPTER XIV.

HE comes forward from behind the curtains of the window, where he has been idly playing with his mother's lap-dog; he is a trifle paler than usual, and his eyes are brilliant.

"How paltry a thing it is, this everlasting denunciation

of the 'poor' man," says he with a sneer. He addresses no one in particular, but for a second he lets his eye rest on his mother. "What can money have to do with the man himself? It can neither lift nor lower his morality. There is something vulgar in the dislike to poverty that some people profess. Money is not everything. Heaven has granted to the comparative poor ones of society, many compensations. The most charming people I have known have not been amongst the merchant princes of the world. They have had but light acquaintance with purple and fine linen, but they have had in exchange for that goodly raiment, kind hearts and perfect manners—advantages that many rich friends of mine do not possess."

He has been pulling the little dog's ears all the time he has been speaking, and the little creature has been making vigorous efforts to kiss him in return. Now he drops it without a word of warning into Mrs. Vaudrey's lap, who gives a jump, and says, "Oh, my!" as naturally as possible.

This outburst of his has been regarded by his mother, and justly, as a direct attack upon herself, and she resents it accordingly. To her mind it had been provoked by that allusion to Colonel D'Arcy made a few minutes ago, but as a fact, it was her unkind allusion to the Vaudreys' poverty that had provoked it. It was Mrs. Vaudrey's part he had taken, though it might be perhaps a question as to whether he would have been so ready to avenge her, had the D'Arcys' name not been mentioned.

Lady Stamer's cold smile has followed every word of her son's utterance. She has seemed even to admire him. It is plain, at all events, that he has amused her. If he had hoped to disconcert her, he has been utterly at fault.

"Is he not in earnest?" says she, turning to Mrs. Coventry with quite a glowing smile for her. "Is he not quite like one of his own enchanting beggars, whom he has just been sketching to us, with so able a tongue, when he thus lets himself go? My dear Eaton, this is a surprise—a most gratifying one. You are generally so silent, when with me at all events, that I had no idea you could be so eloquent. And all about nothing too, that is the chief charm, the real cleverness of it. Now if you took a subject of burning moment in hand——"

"If he went into Parliament," suggests Mrs. Coventry, smiling at him.

"True. There is no reason why he should not, some day. You really should think of it, my dear Eaton. To be able to '*orate*' as you do (to use an American word), without a second's preparation, is to be indeed gifted. You are nearly as eloquent as Marian; that should be a bond between you. If ever he goes into Parliament, Marian, you, as an old friend, must promise to help him with his address to his constituents."

"Smart," says Mrs. Vaudrey to herself, "but not smart enough. He will not marry Marian."

"A poor help," says Miss Vandeleur, smiling.

"An excellent one, I should say, and he too, unless his judgment is warped beyond redemption. But about the D'Arcys; we were talking of Colonel D'Arcy, were we not?"

She has deliberately brought up the subject again, knowing that Eaton writhes beneath it, for one thing to punish him for what she styles his insolence, for another to show him that she will not be put down by him or any other.

"Yes, yes, we were," says Mr. Blount mildly. "We were all agreeing, I think, that he is one of the most agreeable people we know."

"Were we?" says Lady Stamer, transfixing him with her glasses. "Put me out of the 'all' please. For my part, I think his manners and those of his family generally, leave a great deal to be desired."

"Now, how?" demands Eaton, who has perhaps inherited some of his doggedness from her. If she had thought to subdue *him*, she too has been mistaken.

"Dear Eaton, I am not arguing with you. To argue with such a headstrong person is to know fatigue. I was merely making a remark to Mrs. Coventry."

"Oh! as for me," says Mrs. Coventry with a laugh, "I assure you I like the colonel immensely. He is one of the very few people with whom I can converse for half an hour without being bored to death."

"You are fortunate," says Lady Stamer, waving her fan slowly to and fro, and pretending to suppress a very superior smile.

"Still, my dear mother, you have not mentioned your objections to him," says Eaton.

"Mrs. Coventry has suggested your right line to you, Eaton," says Lady Stamer pleasantly. "You should have been an M.P. rather than a soldier; in the House you

would have made yourself heard. I think if I were a betting man I should back you liberally to reduce even the Irish members to silence, through sheer perseverance alone. As it is, you are completely thrown away."

"But about Colonel D'Arcy," says her son, with that persistency that has not endeared him to her. "You object to him. Why?"

"For many reasons. For every reason," with a touch of the temper that has hitherto been rigorously kept under control. "He is a person impossible to *place*, but as I regard him, he is positively insufferable. He says just what he chooses about most things, and has evidently no respect of persons."

"By which you mean that he speaks the truth in season and out of it. A curious accusation to bring against a son of Erin," says Eaton, with a mirth that is perhaps a trifle sardonic. "Where was he born then that he never came within touch of his Blarney Stone?"

"Where indeed! I am not his keeper," says Lady Stamer as pleasantly as ever, and as *unpleasantly*. "He may have travelled all over the known globe, so far as I know. What I do know is, that he is brusque to a singular degree; and that all such people are better *out* of society than in it."

"What on earth can he have been saying about you?" says Mrs. Vaudrey. "I am afraid he has hopelessly offended you—but how? It must have been inadvertently, at all events. Perhaps he let out something that was in his mind without knowing it." This is highly suggestive, and leads Lady Stamer into even a more indignant frame of mind.

"Something against me?" says she with assumed cheerfulness. "Oh, that would be *too* amusing."

"It might be amusing, but one can't tell. Mistakes are often more embarrassing than truths. But you are so clever, you ought to know. Of course we can't know, but now if you were a person who could be rough, or proud, or could have behaved yourself frowardly towards him in any way, the situation might be understood of the people. As it *is*, we all quite know how immaculate you are, and that therefore the quarrel cannot have been of your seeking."

This is nearly as terrible as Lady Stamer's descents upon

her. There had been a day last year when Lady Stamer had gone to a local concert without remembering to remove from cheek and brow the tell-tale powder that lay thickly on them. It cost her many a *mauvais quart d'heure* afterwards, and her maid an excellent place, and the worst of it was, that not even these trials seemed to expiate the offence. It was not forgotten. Just now everybody seems to remember the little folly as freshly as though it had happened yesterday. Mrs. Vaudrey, angered by that uncivil allusion to her domestic difficulties, has avenged herself to a very satisfactory extent.

It is now Lady Stamer's turn to colour, slowly, but perceptibly.

"Certainly not of mine; and as a fact there is no quarrel. I was merely saying that I do not think the D'Arcys good form. As for the girl, she is only a horrid little horse-breaker, no more."

"Something more, surely," says Eaton, who has grown rather white. "A very lovely and charming girl, for example."

"Oh, my dear Eaton, as for *you*!" says Lady Stamer with a shrug and a badly-suppressed bitterness of tone, "we cannot expect an unbiassed opinion from you; we know you are wedded to the family."

"Not yet, not *yet*," says Mr. Blount jovially, with a loud laugh, for which witticism he is rewarded by a stony stare from both mother and son.

"Some more tea, Bartholomew?" says Lady Stamer, in her most unpleasant tone. "No? Then perhaps you will ring for Mrs. Coventry's carriage. You look," severely, "as if you wanted something to do. So sorry you must go so soon," to Mrs. Coventry. "We hardly see anything of you now. Good-bye."

The others being prompt to follow Mrs. Coventry's lead, the drawing-room at Parklands is soon deserted.

CHAPTER XV.

"It was absurd your inducing me to accept the invitation to the Castle," says Evelyn. "You must have known I couldn't go, after all. Cinderellas should stay at home,

Had not aspire to duchesses and such fal-lals. The sober walks of life are for them."

She is evidently in the last stage of depression. Sitting on a box that does duty for a chair, she looks up at Miss Vandeleur, with reproach in her eyes. Miss Vandeleur is sitting on the only available chair in Evelyn's bed-room; the other is sufficiently far gone in the disease called old age, to be found out by the most casual observer. It is indeed a rather decrepit room altogether. The little iron bedstead would have given way long ago if any other but the slender form of its owner had stepped into it. The looking-glass is ridiculously small, and tremulous at the hinges. The dressing-table is propped against the wall; the old wardrobe has a lock that would defy the ingenuity of any one except Evelyn to open or shut it. Everything is, however, scrupulously clean, and some flowers give it a friendly look. Its poor little mistress, looking the picture of despair, turns her eyes away from her visitor, and gives way to a deep sigh.

"You forget Cinderella changed her whole life by going to a ball, given not by a duchess, but by a prince," says Marian gaily. "I have set my heart on your having one good week."

"Well, but how? Do you think I am going in these rags?" pulling out a bit of her much-washed cotton frock, with a disgusted air. "To be laughed at by all the grandees. Not likely! And I could not ask the colonel for money just now."

"No?"

"Oh no! I haven't said a word to any one," lowering her voice, "but of late he has seemed terribly depressed. Not *before* people, you will understand, but at home—with *us*. Both Jimmy and I have noticed it. Do you know he has grown quite irritable? He, who used to have such a lovely temper."

"But how do you account for it?"

"I'm not sure about it," hesitating, "but I think it is something about money."

Miss Vandeleur makes an impatient movement.

"It always *is*," she says.

"I can't quite make it out," says Evelyn in a puzzled way, a frown wrinkling her smooth forehead. "But I think he gave money to Major Arthurs. You remember

him, don't you? A queer sort of man who used to live down at that house just outside Fenton. He was there all last autumn."

"Of course I remember," gravely; "he gave him money, you say. But I did not think the colonel could—had—that he——"

"No, he couldn't, of course. He never has a penny to spare, poor darling; but he put his name to some paper——"

"Oh!" says Miss Vandeleur; she stops short and looks at Evelyn. "But Major Arthurs we always thought was a man who had plenty of money."

"The colonel thought so too," says Evelyn ruefully. "He doesn't think so *now*. At all events, however it was, he asked the colonel to lend him some money, and the colonel did it. He can't say no to any one."

"A great pity. He backed some bills for him, I suppose?"

"Yes, that is it," eagerly; as if helped out of a difficulty.

"It is the same thing, isn't it?"

"Worse, far worse!" says Miss Vandeleur, with a very concerned air.

"Well, that's what he did," says Evelyn.

About this time last year, or perhaps a month or two later, Major Arthurs had dropped down upon Fenton as if from the clouds.

He had, however, brought with him a considerable amount of information about himself, and references to relations or friends of theirs in the neighbourhood; to say nothing of an excellent hunting stud, a groom, a helper, and all the usual signs of being comfortably off, if not actually wealthy.

He had just retired from the army; why, most satisfactorily explained. He had distant connections who were known, by name at least, to all at Fenton; perhaps not sufficiently well known to be put down on their correspondence list, but still known; and after all, one can write at any moment even to the commonest stranger, and get an answer too, if occasion arises for it.

He was a youngish man, who might have been thirty and probably was forty; with a manner so gay, so *insouciant*, so genuine, that soon he was a general favourite in Fenton.

At Parklands he had been made specially welcome, his mother (who luckily for her was dead for many years) having been a cousin and a great friend of Lady Stamer's.

To Colonel D'Arcy, this dropper in upon his stupidity had been a perfect godsend. He had welcomed him as such after a first delightful interview, during which Major Arthurs had displayed such a knowledge of horseflesh as should encharm the soul of any Irishman.

As a fact he really *did* understand horses. He was, too, a genial man in conversation; never self-assertive, never unduly obstinate, always willing to concede a touchy point; always ready to smooth the angularity of a troublesome corner. He was indeed of so gay and of so harmonious a disposition that rich and poor alike paid him court; and one poor Irishman in particular was brought to great straits because of him.

No one knew how it began: the colonel himself being always rather hazy about it. But at all events he induced the colonel to put his name to several bills for him, always protesting in his lightest, airiest manner, that it was but a matter of the moment only. Indeed, so well appointed was the well-connected man that the colonel felt the sort of worldly pleasure in helping the rich that we all do.

The last bill had been signed in January, a six months' bill, and almost directly afterwards the genial man had disappeared. He had bidden the neighbourhood generally a good-bye for a week or two. He was going to London on Friday—could he do any commissions? He would be back on Monday. This to the women. He had even pressed the colonel to come up to town with him, knowing, perhaps, that the colonel never had money to fritter away upon trips of any sort.

He had gone to London—or to the other place—but he had certainly not come back on Friday, or any other day. Indeed he never came back at all.

Though to show he was not a common villain who might be a disgrace to this mild book, let it be known at once that his references were quite correct; that he was related to so and so; that his mother was Lady Stamer's cousin; but that, in spite of all these claims to respectability, he was an unmitigated blackguard, who had been kicked out of the army and every club to which he had belonged for cheating; and was now merely a beast of prey, roaming the earth in search of some such easy prey as Colonel D'Arcy.

All this might have been matter of comment, and might have prevented many important and sad events in Fenton,

if somebody had taken the precaution to write a line or two about him to those people whom he had, with the boldness of the successful swindler, given as his referees.

The colonel was the victim ; but for a long time he had remained blind to his situation. He had indeed thought nothing of the unpleasant position in which he stood, until a note from the manager of the local bank, saying the first bill was due, roused within him a faint touch of anxiety as to where Arthurs was. He wrote to the club address that Arthurs had given him, but got no answer. He wrote again, and was informed that Major Arthurs had taken his name off the books two years ago. He then wrote to his home address, where the man's father was popularly supposed to be living, and received in return a post-card from the house-keeper, to say Major Arthurs had not been there for eighteen months, and that she had no idea where he was at present.

All this was very discouraging. Colonel D'Arcy was conscious of a slight feeling of alarm, but disliking unpleasant sensations of all sorts thrust it determinedly into the background. He took the whole affair indeed with extraordinary phlegm, until the second bill fell due, and was forthwith protested.

Then a doubt that Arthurs must be dead, first filled his breast, and that, if so, it might prove awkward for him—Colonel D'Arcy. It was not indeed until his wife, who sometimes had glimpses of common sense, suggested to him that, possibly Arthurs might have been an accomplished swindler that the full meaning of the injury that had been done him awoke within his breast.

If this thing was true—why, then—— He could not follow out the thought ; in one little second, it seemed to him, he was by many years an older man ; but he *had* to face it out. Why, *then*—he was a pauper, and his children beggars !

It was a bitter moment. All that he had would scarcely suffice to meet the unjust debt. His house, his few acres, his furniture, his horses—that were his principal means of living—that last young colt, that looked as if he was capable of so many things—all must go. His heart contracted with a cruel pang as he thought of that young colt.

Yet it, and every one of his worldly possessions, would scarcely suffice to satisfy this claim upon him. *Two thousand pounds !* Dropping into a chair he wondered vaguely

how he could ever have been capable of letting himself in for so outrageous a piece of folly.

"Evelyn," says Miss Vandeleur, getting up from the reliable chair and seating herself on the half of Evelyn's box, "it is, as you say, impossible that you should now trouble your uncle about money matters. It is equally impossible that you should refuse the duchess's invitation. In fact you *must* go to the Castle, and as for your clothes, I'll see about that."

"Oh, *no*," flushing hotly.

"Don't try to be conventional," says Miss Vandeleur calmly. "There is no necessity for it, between you and me, and I know all you think you ought to say, and the absurdity of it. I am as fond of you as if you were my sister, and if I have money and you haven't, there is no reason on earth why I shouldn't give you some of mine. If you were rich and I was poor, I shouldn't hesitate for a moment to——"

"Say no to me for my kind offer," interrupts Evelyn, with a little curious laugh.

"I hope you are not going to be troublesome about this matter, Evelyn," says Miss Vandeleur in a rather vexed tone. "Supposed dignity very often comes under the head of folly. If I thought you should not accept my offer, believe me, I should never have made it; and," with a milder glance, "*I thought* we were such great friends."

"So we are; so we are," cries Evelyn, softened at once by the reproach in her friend's eyes. "And I shouldn't mind a bit letting you give me a frock, only—there's the colonel, you see—he would not like it either."

The "either" is a slip, and tells her real feelings.

"As little as you would, you mean."

"I don't think I meant that," restlessly.

"No?" wisely refraining from pressing this point.

"Then, if it is only the colonel—why should he know?"

"It might be hidden from him, of course," with down-cast eyes and dejected mien. "But—I should feel so horrid about keeping it secret from him; you see, here, in this house, we tell each other everything."

"A well-regulated household!" says Marian laughing. "Nonsense, however! If it comes to that, I'll tell the colonel all about it, and you'll see he will let me have my own way in spite of you." She turns the girl's face lightly

towards hers and scans it with kindly scrutiny. "I should have more trouble to gain your consent to my scheme than the colonel's," says she shrewdly.

"Oh, how you misjudge me," says Evelyn, with a disgraceful, but useless, attempt at subterfuge; she draws her face away from the other's gentle touch, and smiles nervously. Miss Vandeleur, as if a little puzzled, waits a minute or so, and then slightly changes the conversation.

"I shall feel absolutely friendless if you won't come," she says. "I shall be almost alone, and duchesses, being rare, are oppressive. If we were *together*, we might enjoy ourselves, and Eaton Stamer is to be there and his brother." She throws in the brother as though Sir Bertram is a person of small account.

"Yes, I know," says Evelyn. She is twisting her handkerchief round and round her first finger as if her whole soul is bent on bandaging that slender member. But now, quite suddenly, she lifts her head and looks at Marian.

"Do you know what I heard a few days ago?" says she, speaking with singular distinctness. "That Lady Stamer is very anxious that you should marry Eaton."

"Is she?" says Miss Vandeleur. She bursts out laughing, yet a crimson flush dyes her cheek and brow. "People often show most anxiety about things that they cannot bring to pass."

"You mean——?" leaning forward.

"That Eaton will not ask me to marry him."

"Only that?"

"Why—if you will have it," says Marian, laughing again—"though it is a thing a woman should not say until the opportunity has been given her of proving the truth of her words—I certainly do not want to marry Eaton."

"Ah!" says the girl quickly. Then—as if crushed by some fear, she lets her eyes fall, and her fingers fasten closely in the handkerchief that has now become a mere little round ball. "It—I thought it would have been rather a nice marriage," says she confusedly.

"According to your own showing, you and Lady Stamer are for once agreed," says Marian lightly. She understands it all quite well now, and resolves to return to her effort to take the girl with her to the Castle. "I am sorry I must disappoint all your hopes. But then—you have disappointed

mine. Evelyn, 'change your mind. I am sure you would enjoy your week at the Castle."

"Oh, I should like it," her face now bright and irresolute. "But—would there be time?"

"To get a frock or two? Of course! I could telegraph to town. We could get down the skirts, ready made, from Black's, and you know Marsden is excellent so far as a body goes. She will fit you and follow out all our directions. It is now"—glancing at her watch—"two o'clock. If I telegraph at once we could get them down by the last train."

"Do you think I ought to go?" says Evelyn still hesitating. It is the last faint protest, and is altogether different from the hesitation of a while ago.

"*Pouf!*" says Marian contemptuously. "Get up and help me to write the telegram; time is flying."

"Oh! I'm *glad* I'm going," cries Evelyn presently, when a messenger has been dispatched with the telegram. She throws her arms round Marian and gives her what the children call a "bear's hug." "I do so want to see a little bit of life before I die. And I want too—to make Lady Stamer *mad*."

"That's being honestly vindictive," says Marian. "Poor Lady Stamer, I often think she is more to be pitied than anybody."

"I don't pity her. I shouldn't dream of wasting so good a feeling on her. See how she behaves to Eaton. All her affection is given to Sir Bertram."

"And he, I'm afraid, doesn't care for her," in a low tone.

"That is only mere justice. However, he can manage very well for himself. He has not so much feeling as Eaton."

"You are quite mistaken there," says Miss Vandeleur, with sudden and unexpected warmth. "Because he is so silent, people think he is phlegmatic—but they are mistaken."

"You seem to have studied him," says Evelyn curiously.

"Most people are interesting to me," says Marian calmly. "I like to think them out." She has quite recovered her usual mild manner. "And, after all, I don't see what great difference Lady Stamer makes between her two sons."

"Oh! Then you are the only one who *doesn't* see it. She adores Sir Bertram, and treats Eaton abominably."

"What!" laughing; "*you* can say that? You, who tell me she is bent on giving him—me!"

"Well, that puzzles me certainly. I wonder," says Evelyn thoughtfully, "why it hasn't occurred to her to give you to Sir Bertram."

"*Evelyn!*" says Miss Vandeleur with a sharpness, an involuntary movement, that startles the young girl.

"Why," says she, "I——"

"Oh, no, it was nothing," interrupts Miss Vandeleur quickly. "Only—you must not talk to me—like that—about Lady Stamer. She wouldn't like it. Nobody would. And as for Sir Bertram——"

"She won't hear of it," says Evelyn; "she can't. I never said it to any one before."

"I hope not," earnestly, and looking with a rather pale face at her companion. "Promise me more, that you will not ever say it again."

"I promise," in a rather wondering tone. "But—— Oh," looking out of the window, "here is Eaton coming across the lawn, and Batty" (Mr. Blount's pet name) "and——Mr. Crawford. Come down and help me to talk to them."

CHAPTER XVI.

"HERE we are!" cries Mr. Blount cheerfully, as the girls enter the drawing-room. He is always terribly cheerful. "Eaton and I were coming up to have a look at you, when we met Mr. Crawford. We asked him to give us the light of his countenance. Whatever we are, *he* looks respectable. So we thought if he took us in tow we might present a better appearance."

"Against every word of that speech I enter a protest," says Captain Stamer.

"So do I," says Mr. Crawford. "It is most unfair that he should give you the impression that he induced me to come here. I assure you, Miss D'Arcy, I was within your gates, with the design of calling upon—Mrs. D'Arcy, when Mr. Blount met me."

"Tut," says she, with a tilt of her pretty chin, "who minds Batty!" Whereupon that young man turns on her a glance replete with reproach.

"You know I am defenceless when in your presence, Evelyn," says he mournfully.

"And a good thing too," says she, "for if you had a sword, I certainly would be the one to draw it—not you. And after that, the consequences to you would probably be awful."

"She's not well to-day," says Mr. Blount in a generous aside. "One can see that. Well, a truce to hostilities. What we principally came for was to know who is, and who is not, going to the Castle next week?"

"We are," says Marian Vandeleur, including Evelyn in the "we" by a slight gesture.

"Oh! you are going, then," says Captain Stamer, addressing Evelyn. He had evidently had doubts about it.

"Yes; Marian has persuaded me," says she rather shamefacedly. Perhaps after all she should not have accepted those pretty gowns. A cloud steals over her face.

"Then we are all going," says Mr. Blount. "That throws a roseate hue over the fact that we shall have to koo-too to a live duchess for seven long days. The tribe is so very nearly extinct that we approach it with reverence and awe."

"You, too, are to be one of the duchess's guests?" asks Evelyn, smiling at Mr. Crawford.

"No. I am not so fortunate," replies he, smiling in return, as though he finds it impossible to resist her; as if, too, smiles are strangers to him. "I am sorry *now* I was not introduced to her. She might have asked me." The implied compliment is very delicately tendered.

"Oh! I am sorry," says the girl very gently, and with something of sincerity in her tone. She is leaning forward and looking up at him, with parted lips, and eyes that smile at him through lids half lowered. That she *is* really a little sorry because he cannot be one of her companions at the Castle is quite clear. Only a little sorry, truly—but how much even a crumb is to a starving soul.

"I say," says Mr. Blount to Evelyn with a sprightly laugh, "you should have seen my aunt's face when she heard you were going to the Castle. Green isn't the colour. It was ever so many shades deeper than that. No love lost between you two, eh?"

A deadly silence follows this pleasing remark. A quick

red flush mounts to Evelyn's brow, an angry flush, and she straightens her pretty figure and throws up her head in a rather militant fashion. Miss Vandeleur bends over a bunch of Dijon roses, and seeks for comfort there. Stamer, looking at the culprit, explains all too fully by his glance that it would give him keen pleasure to drop him by the nape of the neck into the garden below.

The entrance of Mrs. D'Arcy is felt by everybody, save one, to be a special intervention of Providence. In a body they rise to greet her. She is, indeed, received with an enthusiasm that possibly puzzles her.

Evelyn alone remains unmoved.

"I hate her!" says she, with the prompt and terrible downrightness that belongs to youth alone.

"Who, dear?" asks Mrs. D'Arcy, pausing in her smiling vivacious journey up the room.

"There is only one person," says Evelyn with a little shrug—"you know! Lady Stamer."

"Oh, nonsense!" says Mrs. D'Arcy, with an apologetic glance at Eaton.

"Yes, I do. I can't *bear* her," persists Evelyn mutinously, in spite of a second warning glance from Marian, who too would have her bear in mind the presence of Lady Stamer's son.

"Dear Evelyn!" says she in a very low tone. But the lowest tone in a small room is generally the property of all.

"I know," says the girl promptly. "It doesn't matter. He understands. I've often told him how I hate her. You aren't offended, Eaton, are you? And she hates *me*. She is as velvety as a cat to other people, but she looks at me like *this*," closing her lovable eyes, and caricaturing Lady Stamer's put on hauteur to perfection.

"I don't think, Evelyn, you ought to speak of Lady Stamer like that," says Mrs. D'Arcy, making her protest plainly through a sense of duty, that is utterly destroyed by the fact that she is laughing immoderately.

"No? Why?" demands Evelyn with a tilt of her chin. "Because she happens to be my enemy? oh, that is too hard a doctrine for ordinary people. And besides, even in little ways she is aggravating. She," looking round suddenly to where Mr. Crawford is sitting, as though sure of getting sympathy from him, "always gives my name only

two syllables. She calls me Eve-lyn, *so*," with a nod of her small head. "As though I were the mother of all living. In Ireland we hate to hear the name pronounced like that."

"She's a criminal!" says Mr. Blount. "She oughtn't to be let loose on society. What are the police about?"

"And I like to be called Ev-e-lyn, *so*," goes on Miss D'Arcy, very properly taking no heed of him.

"Evelyn, *so*!" repeats Captain Stamer, in a little mocking tone, that is a very successful imitation of hers.

"Evelyn, *so, so*," says Mr. Blount quite affectionately.

"*Evelyn*!" says Mr. Crawford.

It is so sudden a pronounciation of her name—there is something so passionate yet so despairing in the sound of it—that involuntarily everybody grows still, and looks at Mr. Crawford. He has spoken from out the gloom of the falling curtains, and his voice is startling because of its strange intensity. It is as though the man has forgotten that any one is within these four walls, save he himself, and the bearer of that charmed name. Perhaps, indeed, for the moment he has even forgotten *her* bodily presence.

There is something tragic in his utterance that reveals to all present the secret of his heart—all save one. That one is Evelyn.

"Eh?" says she, as though indeed he had called to her. She turns her expressive face to his, as though waiting for an answer. For the second she is dead to the thought that he certainly would not address her by her christian name, and looks at him expectantly as though he had actually called to her—as in truth he has, *unconsciously*, from out the emptiness of his soul.

But no answer comes to her vague inquiry. Mr. Crawford, as if not knowing that any word had escaped him or her, sits motionless, the absent look that usually characterizes his face now strongly pronounced. It is an inward gaze, that repulses the many and raises pity in the few. Evelyn still leans forward, fascinated by that strange stare, and waiting for the answer—that will never come.

There threatens to be a very awkward pause, when suddenly Mr. Blount comes to the rescue.

"*Quite so*!" says he promptly, addressing Crawford, whom indeed he is regarding with a delighted eye. To him, Crawford is a man rich in promise. Anything so *naïve*, so *fresh*, has seldom come within his knowledge. To be in

love is one thing; to betray one's love so nobly to all the world is quite another; and to give a "private view" of it to one's friends, as Crawford has just done, is a novelty indeed, and almost more than need be expected even in this ingenuous age.

Mr. Blount is conscious that he is enjoying himself thoroughly, and that he has by no means wasted a day in coming to Firgrove. Not only Crawford but his cousin seem full of possibilities. Eaton, sitting over there, with an eye fixed on Crawford and with murder in that eye, is a feast in itself.

"You like my name?" says Evelyn at last, getting no direct answer from Crawford, and being anxious to hear somebody's voice again.

"Yes," says Mr. Crawford slowly, like one awakening from a dream. A hideous dream, if one may judge by the wildness of the eyes he now raises to Evelyn's face. Whatever his thoughts have been during the past three minutes, wherever they have flown, no man need envy them!

"You can see at once that it is a prettier name with three syllables than with two," goes on Evelyn in her little friendly way, still addressing him, as if that strange expression of his is unknown to her.

"We all know it is the dearest name in the world," says Captain Stamer unexpectedly, and with something of the vehemence of anger in his tone; he is smiling, however, as he speaks; and as he ceases he laughs—rather nervously. Of late he always laughs when attempting to pay Evelyn a compliment. A tincture of fear has mingled itself with his friendliness towards her. To Evelyn it seems as though he is ever bent on turning what might be reality into jest, and the thought puzzles her. It is at such moments as these that she understands him least—is least at touch with him; perhaps because it is that at such unreal periods he does not understand himself.

"Those poor people you have been so kind to, Mr. Crawford—they are so grateful," says Mrs. D'Arcy, beaming upon the silent man with an admiration not to be subdued. "Mr. Vaudrey has been telling me all about it—that poor boy, he is really on the road to recovery, I hear. What a blessing to his poor mother—and to his benefactor too," with another smile and a little nod—"a blessing that will come home, I don't doubt."

"It is nothing, nothing," says Mr. Crawford hastily, crossing the room to her side, in a certain speedy fashion that suggests the idea of his being anxious to lower her tone. "Mr. Vaudrey has done everything. I have been glad to be his helper."

"You would play second fiddle," says she, as if amused. "Why, that is a *rôle* that all men refuse. No, no, you must wear your blushing honours as thick as you have woven them. The song of praise will be sounded in your ears whether you will or no."

"Lamentations, it should be," says he in a low tone. Then; "You have been very kind to me so far, Mrs. D'Arcy," says he, with his eyes on the ground. "You can, if you will, even add to that kindness. Never again give me credit for any charitable act."

"Oh! but that is supreme modesty," says she lightly. "It is almost affectation. In reality, though one disclaims the desire for praise, one feels aggrieved if the praise is not given. You must not prove yourself superlatively good, or you will be unpopular in Fenton."

"I shall not be proved unpopular on that count," returns he slowly.

"Well, I don't know—you bid fair for it. There is Evelyn, she is almost as bad as the rector in her admiration of your charities."

"Miss D'Arcy is charity personified if she can think thus of me. But I do not dare to believe she thinks of me at all. As for charity, it has its being under so many hundred names that the real true charity is hard to find."

"Love is the best name of all," says Mrs. D'Arcy.

"Ah!" He pauses, and looks down again. "To be truly charitable, then, you believe one should love the object of one's charity?"

"Oh, no, not that exactly; charity would be an easy virtue if that were so. But one should love to give where necessity calls for giving, and one should not look for gain to self *in* that giving, whether from earth or heaven."

Mr. Crawford lifts his eyes, and studies her face for a moment with a certain intentness. And now he sighs and turns aside.

"How gently you can deal a death-blow," says he. "But a truce to all such arguments; they are sickly, dull, and slow; you must pardon my introduction of them."

"Of charity! that sweetest of all gifts——"

"Let us talk of something else," says he with determination. "Of—your niece, for example."

"Of Evelyn? Almost as sweet a topic," says Mrs. D'Arcy genially. "I'm glad you like her." To Mrs. D'Arcy, who is still young, it seems quite natural to speak without reserve of so young a girl as Evelyn to this man, who may well come under the category of old.

"Everybody likes her, I suppose. It is a paltry word," says Mr. Crawford.

"Yes; *most* people, at all events. You can see for yourself how lovable she is—so bright so pretty. You think her pretty?"

"That too is a paltry word," says he smiling. "Surely—like the flowers or the birds—she is lovely."

"She is—she is!" with open delight. "*You* understand her. She is the sunshine of this house; I'm sure how I—how the children—could get on without her, I haven't the courage to work out; and as for Colonel D'Arcy, he adores her."

"And yet," says Mr. Crawford thoughtfully, "there have been moments when I have seen the gaiety fade from her face, and a shadow replace it; I——" he pauses with a touch of confusion curious in so quiet a man. "I have watched her. I am a student of human nature, you will see; and the changes in her nature, from sunshine to gloom at intervals, have I confess, interested me."

"As for that," says Mrs. D'Arcy, with a half glance to where Evelyn is standing at the end of the room trying to put a spider down Mr. Blount's back, "she often puzzles *me*. But there are reasons for those sudden changes in her—many, indeed, but one that overtops all the others. The few I can name, but that other we never speak about; she has made us promise silence. You will hear her discussed often, but you must not mind all that people say."

"I shall mind nothing."

"She has had a sad life. As I think I told you before she was made an orphan when still very young. Her mother died in giving her birth; her father, who was an old man when she was born, he—well, well, it is a sad story, Mr. Crawford, and one we seldom dwell on. We never talk of it—at all events before her."

Mr. Crawford inclines his head sympathetically. "Father,

a scoundrel, did something disreputable," is his swift inward comment on her words, to be followed as swiftly by a bitter self-accusation. Who is he that he should condemn any man—call any man a sinner!

"Yes, yes," goes on Mrs. D'Arcy meditatively. "She has had some griefs—great griefs. But she is, as I have said, the sunshine of this house for all that. She has," with a stifled sigh, "little lovable ways of her own that can cheer and comfort when most things fail." This last terrible trouble of the colonel's comes home to her as she speaks, and with it the knowledge of how Evelyn has striven to lessen it and give hope to him, and not only to him but to her likewise.

"It is an easy matter to believe in the beauty of your niece's nature," says Mr. Crawford in his slow, methodical fashion.

CHAPTER XVII.

FIVE long days, oppressively warm, inconceivably monotonous, have at last buried themselves, with a reluctance, and a most indecent determination to make the most of the time allotted them; and now at last the greater number of those we know are assembled on the lawn of Carminster Castle. To-day is Tuesday; to-morrow July will be a whole week old.

Already, as we see at every glance around, summer is well advanced, and soon autumn will be with us. But who cares for that so long as the sun is shining, and flowers blooming, and life, not death, is present. A fig for those pessimistic ones who, forgetting the joys of the moment, look forward only to the sorrows of the future. To be morbid is to be an ungrateful fool. "Sufficient unto the day," says the greatest authority of all, "is the evil thereof."

To-day is one of July's gayest efforts. It is so mild, so balmy, so full of perfumes delicately mixed and mingled, that the vaunted air that is popularly supposed to blow so "soft o'er Ceylon's Isle" is but a distant cousin to it; not even a near relation.

The different groups spread abroad over the terraces, lawns, and tennis courts, are all either gasping with heat

or sitting languidly beneath wide white umbrellas, wondering why on earth they are not indoors behind the kindly blinds that are bidding defiance to old Sol.

"I shan't live through it," says Evelyn, who has cast herself upon a long garden seat somewhat in the shade, after giving her opponents a terrible beating at the last game. "How do I look, Batty?" to Mr. Blount. "Boiled?—roasted?"

"That's just like girls!" says Mr. Blount, who is cross because he is too warm. "They keep on hinting and hinting in the meanest fashion, when they might just as well speak out at once. All the world knows that you want me to say you are as pale as the driven snow, in spite of the day being at——"

"I want nothing of the kind," says Miss D'Arcy indignantly. "Really, Bartholomew, I think it would be an advantage to you if you——"

"Were a little less candid and honest-spoken," supplies Mr. Blount promptly. "I agree with you. The ingenuousness of my speech very often——"

"Ingenuity you mean," scornfully.

"That's an old trick, you know," says Mr. Blount. "Any one could do that. Most words can be twisted, but nothing can finally crush the *Truth*, in large capitals. And, as I have just said, girls are all regular born Isaac Waltons. Fishing for compliments is their forte."

"What's yours? Shall I tell you?" Miss D'Arcy is beginning with fell design in her eye, when luckily the duchess strolling up to her puts a semicolon at all events to her next remark.

"I must congratulate you on that last game," says she, smiling at Evelyn, who is accounted very pretty and out of the common run by her. "Mrs. Weekling-Wylde was quite crushed."

"Yes?" says Evelyn hesitating, and looking a little puzzled. As well she may. She has not often heard Mrs. Wylding-Weekes thus named. But the duchess has quite a talent for forgetting little trifles such as names, dates, &c.

"Mrs. Weekling-Wylde is a mere amateur when compared with Miss D'Arcy," says Mr. Blount with astounding gravity. He drops a supernaturally grave wink on Evelyn as he says this, which she openly resents. The duchess, needless to say, is looking the other way.

Her whole attention indeed is given to the advancing figure of a man, whom, as she tells herself, she is unable instantly to place. It is the weekly day she has set apart to receive the county generally, and it is a point of honour with her to be able to remember any one with whom she has had even five minutes' conversation. Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, who arrived an hour ago, was received with effusion, the duchess being under the impression that she was the wife of a county magnate in the neighbourhood, an M.P., and a man of some notoriety who has made himself specially obnoxious over the Irish question, and who is therefore a sort of person to be trotted out and interviewed. It was only indeed when she asked the astonished Mr. Wylding-Weekes what he *really* meant to do for "the poor dear Irish," that the mistake transpired.

Far from being discouraged, however, the duchess, who is in her most genial mood, now looks out afar for fresh material on which to expend her overflowing *bonhomie*.

"Who's the death's-head?" asks she, demanding an answer from Mr. Blount who is nearest to her, but with her eyes on Mr. Crawford, who is slowly making his way towards her across the shaven lawn.

Bartholomew, thus addressed, pours forth explanations to her under his breath.

"Crawford. The Grange. New-comer. Got the 'dyspepsy.' Doesn't know what's good for him. Too much money. One of those 'poor rich men' somebody speaks of. Looks as if he didn't know what to do with his superfluous coppers. Wish *I* was in the way of giving him a lead!"

"Well, why don't you?" asks the duchess.

"Haven't got the tin," says Mr. Blount, with a noble candour that is only to be outdone by the simplicity of his elegance.

The duchess receives Mr. Crawford in her most gracious style. He may be solemn, he is undoubtedly difficult, but the man's a man for a' that.

"Such *perfect* weather," says she, smiling amiably. She is still young, and the responsibilities of her position have ever been sealed books to her. She would have made an excellent wife for a country squire, and indeed for the matter of that she had been an excellent wife to the late duke, who had adored her.

"The best summer we have had for years," says she in her exuberant fashion, beaming on Crawford. Unlike other folk, she always begins with the weather. It is safe. The condition of the atmosphere is therefore a marked feature in her conversation. "*What a sun!* I don't believe India can be warmer!" This is a stock phrase. In winter she alters it by, "I don't believe the North Pole can be colder."

"It means rain, I think," says Mr. Crawford. This is, or at least should be, a damper, but duchesses are never damped.

"You *really* think so? I don't. No, no, those clouds over there mean nothing but perpetual heat." She doesn't want to explain this remarkable prognostication. "The whole look of the afternoon reminds me of that delightful day at Lady Stamer's, where we first met. As I was saying to you then, I think this part of the county is the driest in England."

As she had said nothing to him at Parklands about the county or anything else—for the simple reason that she had not even seen him there—this is a slightly embarrassing speech. Mr. Blount is enchanted by it, and stands by waiting eagerly for a *dénouement* that may add to his delight—but disappointment alone awaits him. Mr. Crawford bows politely, and passes it over, whereupon Mr. Blount falls back on Evelyn with a disgusted countenance.

"Just what I always thought. Man's a perfect hypocrite," says he indignantly.

"Do you play tennis, Mr. Rockfort?" asks the duchess of Crawford pleasantly. "No? What a pity! Well, you know everybody here, I daresay, better than I do. And here is Miss D'Arcy unattached; will you take that seat near her?"

She smiles kindly and moves away, whilst Mr. Crawford, taking her hint with alacrity, drops into the seat next Evelyn.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"THE duchess has a wonderful memory," says Evelyn, with a little amused glance.

"To be so *distinctly* remembered is very flattering," returns he drily, yet with a strong touch of amusement too.

"And the weather—what a resource it is!" continues she mischievously.

"It was through the weather principally that she seemed to remember our first meeting, therefore I should be grateful to it," responds he, adapting himself to her mood.

"Weather!" says Mr. Blount gloomily, who has caught the word. "'Tis folly to praise that. There's only one weather in England. And that's the very mischief."

"I don't think that: do you, Mr. Crawford?" says Evelyn. "See what a delicious day *this* is, and all last week was just as lovely."

"Well, we'll pay for it. *You'll* see," says Mr. Blount, who is evidently determined to take a pessimistic view of all things, with the idea perhaps of checking the unlimited hilarity that prevails all round. "We all know what an English summer means—of late. One hot day, and then—the deluge."

"Go away, Batty! You're in a bad temper," says Miss D'Arcy.

"Is that a hint?" retorts he. He rises with pretended confusion, and having cast a glance full of deepest reproach at Evelyn (who returns it with a stony stare), he moves away—a step or two. His melancholy has forsaken him. He is himself again. He has scored one in the late encounter. He has stopped short, meditating a further vengeance, when behold it comes to him ready made. Eaton Stamer walks almost actually into his arms.

"Where are you going?" says Mr. Blount, seizing him by both elbows. "Not so fast! That seat there," indicating the one he has just quitted, and towards which Eaton is evidently steering, "is tabooed. They've just turned me out of it."

"Bartholomew!" says Miss D'Arcy, in a tone that would have frozen an Iclander.

"'Tis true—give you my word," persists Mr. Blount plaintively. "Don't mind her. I'm the 'true Thomas' on this occasion. In fact," tucking his arm into Eaton's, "'Two is company—three's trumpery.'"

Stamer, whose face has changed a good deal in spite of his efforts to accept the whole thing as a joke, frees himself lightly of Blount's arm, and looks at Evelyn.

"There is a match being arranged," says he; "you and

I against Mrs. Wylding-Weekes and Harcourt. Will you play?"

There is something unpleasant, defiant, in his tone, but that she scarcely realizes.

"It is so warm," says she hesitating, "and here——"

"So cool," supplements he, smiling always, but so joylessly. She had hesitated, but not with a settled determination to refuse, merely with the natural feeling of relief that the shade has given her, and a disinclination to leave it. Still, she would have played—with him.

"It is cool," says she absently, thinking of the coming game he has proposed to her, and even daring to see herself and him victors in it. She has expected perhaps a little pressure—the old desirable, peremptory, "You *must* come," on his part to which she has been accustomed—and is waiting for it. But he, seeing Crawford beside her, and having guessed his secret, and being filled with a foolish jealousy, lets all things go.

"You are wise," he says, smiling always, but now with open coldness. "The sun is intolerable. You will be happier here in the shade. Marian will perhaps take your place."

He turns abruptly on his heel, and is soon lost to sight behind the rhododendrons. He has gone so quickly that the swift movement to recall him has been unnoticed. It was an almost imperceptible one, and once controlled she is glad that it had not been seen.

Marian! Marian would supply her place! Well, Marian is a good player. Not quite perhaps so good as she is at tennis, but in all other ways how hopelessly superior. Yes, Marian can take her place. And what was it that Mrs. Vaudrey had said?

"I *hate* this place," says she, rising suddenly, and turning large troubled eyes on Mr. Crawford. "It is stifling! Surely there must be air *somewhere*."

"In the gardens?" suggests he.

"There, if anywhere, I suppose," returns she with a rather tired little smile.

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The day is waning. Half-past six has sounded from the clock in the old tower. Most of the visitors have departed, and only the house party sit lounging upon chairs and cushions and rugs, enjoying the last dying rays of the sun-

light. Everybody is a little tired, a little disinclined to stir, a good deal inclined towards seriousness. Everybody, that is, except Mr. Blount. He is neither tired nor serious, and is about as restless as he can be.

He is at present chasing the little duke round and round a flower bed, his grace screaming with that imagined terror that is the joy of childhood. To him the harmless, if slightly trying Batty, is a vengeful brigand running about seeking whom he may devour.

The brigand growing at last weary, although his prey remains as fresh as morning, sinks into a chair next to Evelyn, and proceeds to prove that though his legs have failed him his tongue is still in great working order.

"You look done up," says he, by way of an agreeable opening to an exhaustive conversation. Now, nobody likes to look done up. Evelyn, who has just returned from a long walk through the beautiful gardens with Mr. Crawford, grows distinctly offended.

"I don't *feel* it," says she, in a little distant fashion.

"Shows how deceitful your countenance is," says Mr. Blount severely, totally unsuppressed.

"What's the matter with my face? Do you see anything the matter with it?" demands she turning to Crawford, who has been asked to stay to dinner by the duchess, and is now awaiting with anxiety the arrival of his clothes.

"No," says he gravely, yet with such evident meaning that a little flush creeps into her face. The most extravagant compliment he could have paid her would have been hardly so eloquent as this one word.

The duchess, who has been revolving from guest to guest, now approaching their corner, comes to a standstill about a yard or so from them.

"What about these pageants for Thursday night?" says she, addressing an elderly man—a weak-minded earl who had been induced to wander from more mirthful scenes into this remote little village, and that, too, in the height of the season. "Oh! no, don't stir. Well, if you *will*," seating herself. "The fact is, I'm uneasy about these tableaux; we have asked everybody to see them and, so far, there is nothing to see."

"But why tableaux?" asks Lord Sardou, quite pertinently for *him*.

"You see my time here is so short," explains her grace.

"Oh! don't say that," says Mr. Blount, breaking into the conversation with a tearful air. "Though so admirably fitted for it, *don't* say heaven is your next abode."

The duchess laughs. She is always glad to laugh.

"No such luck," says she, shaking her black head. "Yorkshire will see me next week, not heaven. The dowager wants to see her grandson, and such a claim is not to be denied. Well," as the young duke rushes towards her and scrambles on to her knee, big boy of seven as he is, "she'll have a goodly sight."

The maternal instinct and the maternal pride are as strong in duchess as in peasant. This duchess winds an arm about her principal possession and he in return grabs her round the neck as roughly as might the peasant's son, and imprints a resounding kiss upon her cheek.

"It did one good to see it," says Mrs. Vaudrey afterwards, who too had been bidden to dinner by her old friend—to the everlasting chagrin of Lady Stamer, who had gone home half an hour ago.

"In the meantime," says the duchess, "I have pledged myself to the people of Fenton to give them some sort of amusement on the night of Thursday next. It rests with all present to make my word good."

"You terrify us!" says a pretty woman, the wife of a celebrated author, who had come down from town with her hostess.

"Tut!" says Mr. Blount, who knows the pretty woman—who, indeed, knows everybody worth knowing. "What's afraid? Eaton," to his cousin who is passing by, "give us your help here."

"Oh, yes, Captain Stamer," says the pretty woman, leaning forward as if sure of a favourable reception, as all pretty women are. "Give us a word, just *one* word—the word in season."

"There is no time for a regular play, you see, and yet I feel we ought to give *some* little spectacle," says the duchess, who always speaks of herself as "*we*." It sounds as though she is aping royalty, but in reality it means only a sort of humility on her part—a desire to include the little duke in all her plans. "And tableaux, if well managed, are pretty, and a good beginning to the dance."

"But tableaux!—they have been so used up. There is scarcely one that is not as old as the hills," says the pretty

woman, whose husband has been sufficiently successful to enable her to be contradictory at times even to a duchess.

"'Tis true," says the duchess meekly, and with evident regret.

She is still hugging her little son in her arms, so that perhaps with so much consolation at hand she does not take to heart so entirely as she should have done the dearth of material for Thursday evening's promised display. Still, she feels it.

"Something must be done," says she, "even though we have to fall back upon the Black Brunswicker once more."

This is awful! A deadly silence encompasses the listeners. A silence that threatens to be eternal; it might indeed have been so, but for one thing. Bartholomew Blount is present!

Have they forgotten him? If so, he soon refreshes their memories.

"*I have an idea!*" says he, rising suddenly from his seat, and turning an illuminated countenance upon the duchess.

"Great heaven!" says Captain Stamer, falling back heavily into the seat Batty has just vacated. He, Eaton, has been sadly in want of a chair for some time, and this seems such an excellent opportunity of getting out of his difficulty that he promptly adopts it.

"Oh, I like that!" says Mr. Blount, very justly aggrieved, not so much because of the impounding of his chair as of the aspersion on his intellect. "There have you been thinking until your brain is ready to burst without the smallest effect, and when I have really developed something, you have the presumption to sneer at me."

"Give us the development, Batty," says Evelyn, lively curiosity in voice and feature.

"Do, please, Mr. Blount," says the duchess. "*Any* little suggestion——"

"It's a big one," interrupts Mr. Blount doggedly. Few people have the courage to interrupt a duchess. Of these few is Mr. Blount, who is plainly no respecter of persons. "I make you a present of it. As you have just hinted, we have all seen the 'Black Brunswicker,' and the 'Huguenot' once or twice. Here is a more modern programme. Let us encourage the nineteenth century mania. Let us encourage advertising. Let us follow in the footsteps of great men. As a beginning let us take the masterpieces of Pear-

and Cope and Jacobs. Let us do them a good turn. Let us help to sell their soap and biscuits and baccy."

Every one looks on Mr. Blount with a regretful eye. Plainly the poor creature is not long for this outside world—soon a strait waistcoat and a padded cell will be his sole possessions.

Apparently, however, there is some one who can appreciate the new suggestion. His small grace, rushing up to the duchess, clasps her knees with his arms, and looks up into her face, his eyes brilliant with expectancy.

"Oh! how *jolly!*" cries he. "Mother—mother, don't you know that picture about the soap with the little baby crying out, and 'He won't be happy till he gets it' underneath. *Who'll do that?*"

Who indeed!

"There might perhaps be a slight difficulty about that particular one," says Mr. Blount with commendable gravity. "But I daresay when we have time to look into it even the—er— rather startling features of that picture may be satisfactorily explained away."

"Are you going to do the explanation?" asks the duchess, who has drawn her boy on to her lap, and is pretending to conceal a smile behind his head.

"Alone I'll do it," says Mr. Blount with a rather Shakespearian air.

"Are we to understand that you will undertake the part?" asks Captain Stamer, who is feeling really interested.

"Why not?" demands Mr. Blount with a mild surprise. "When the original costume is a little toned down I see no reason why I should not delight any audience with a sprawl and a squall that I promise you will be above criticism."

"Oh! *Batty!*" cries Evelyn; she has given way to wild mirth—hitherto checked with difficulty, but now gone beyond control; she leans back in her seat, and laughs unrestrainedly; it is almost as absurd as that picture of Mr. Vaudrey rushing about the village in the long clerical coat and waistcoat only, and twice as amusing. There is an element of grief in the one idea, nothing save a sense of the ridiculous in the other.

"I can't see what there is to laugh at," says Bartholomew, aggrieved. He fixes a plaintive eye on Evelyn; and as if filled with remorse because of it, she sits up suddenly, and

wriggles her right shoulder, and stares at Bartholomew in an almost frenzied fashion.

"What is the matter?" ask Mr. Crawford and Eaton Stamer in the same breath.

"Oh, I don't know—I'm not sure—but I can *feel* it," cries she distractedly; she rises from her seat with signs of mortal terror on her brow, and involuntarily lifts her hand to the shoulder she has wriggled.

Everybody grows terribly concerned. All eyes are directed towards her. Is it catching? Is it in the air. First Mr. Blount threatened with dangerous insanity—and now Miss D'Arcy!

"What is it? What has happened?" ask twenty voices in twenty different tones.

"It is *here!*" cries Evelyn, clutching her shoulder now with a tight hand that is suggestive of death or victory.

"But what—*what?*" demands Mr. Crawford pertinently, who is by this time scarcely less frightened than she appears to be.

"An earwig! an earwig, I am *sure!*" gasps she, still grasping her shoulder and letting her horrified eyes meet his for a moment. "I can feel it crawling, crawling! Oh! what shall I do?"

She makes a step forward, hesitates, and then—no doubt maddened by another "*crawl*"—she flings her racket to one side, and flies precipitately towards the house.

"What a little tornado!" says the pretty woman, who has spent her day picking out faults in Evelyn's faultless face.

"What has happened?" asks the duchess with some anxiety, sweeping up to where Mr. Blount is standing. She had not seen or heard anything, except Evelyn's dart, swift as a swallow's, to the house.

"Nothing—nothing really," says Mr. Blount laughing.

"I suppose it would be indiscreet to ask what has given us this suspicion of tragedy?"

"Not at all—not at all," says Mr. Blount suavely. "So far as I can see, Miss D'Arcy has contracted an earwig during her walk in the gardens with Mr. Crawford, and naturally resents its intrusion upon her privacy. An earwig up one's back is not to be despised. It means business."

"Oh! if it *was* an earwig," says the pretty woman in a distinct tone of unbelief.

"It was, I assure you. I regret that I must persist in my first impression, as I see you are not partial to—earwigs, but so it was. Even the most callous must admit that an earwig is at no time a precious possession, and Miss D'Arcy"—gazing at Evelyn's still flying figure—"seems to have an exaggerated objection to them. See how she runs," pointing to the slender figure now lessening in the distance, but still racing as madly as one of her own colts. "The proverbial three mice aren't in it with her, though after all perhaps the comparison is unfair. For my part, I should far rather be pursued by ten butchers' wives with ten carving knives, than one small diabolical earwig."

"Oh! I wouldn't!" cries the young duke, who has been a rapt listener. "I don't mind earwigs a bit, but a carving knife would be horrid. It could kill a person, but an earwig couldn't."

There is no contradicting this great fact, so the argument comes to an end.

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. BLOUNT's suggestion, though scouted at first, gains ground, and is finally adopted with acclamations by all concerned in the duchess's tableaux. At first it had been determined to take some of the pictures out of the year's academy, but after a careful study of them it was discovered that they were out of the question. Their indigence was terrible. It struck one at the first glance. It was evident that they could not afford a dressmaker, because they had no clothes. Of course no other earthly consideration would have induced them to go about as they did. It was a sad case. They hadn't so much as a penny in their purses. Indeed they *had* no purses. They had nothing.

It was a bad blow, as there was an R.A. staying in the house who could have posed and dressed them, being an authority on tints and attitudes. But even Mrs. Wylding-Weekes was not equal to the occasion.

"If they had even had a few rags," said she reproachfully. She always called her gowns "rags"—she thought it funny.

So after all they fell back on Mr. Blount's suggestion, and blessed him for it. There was so little time to prepare

that perhaps their united acceptance of his idea was not so complimentary as it might have been. But Batty was jubilant.

"Well," says he, "so you've had to fall back on me after all. Tell you what anyhow, you won't be sorry for it. And if you will allow me to suggest one thing more, duchess, it is that you should give your audience to understand that they are to guess each tableau as it comes off. That'll tickle them—keep them up to the mark. Sort of give them to believe that they are behind the limelight themselves. See?"

"Excellent, excellent," says the duchess. "I've been always so afraid that they would go to sleep."

"Leave 'em to me—I'll keep them awake," says Mr. Blount valorously.

So they leave it to him; and, considering all things, the results are not so disastrous as might have been anticipated.

And here's the night, and here's the company—all demurely seated and all eager for the fray.

There had been little time for preparation, yet everybody putting his and her shoulder to the wheel, the costumes are after all a pronounced success. And even if they hadn't been, the county is so delighted at being invited once more to an entertainment at the Castle, which for so many years has been a dead letter to it, that to a man they applaud each picture until they make the welkin ring.

"After all, though, you know, a play—a play is better," whispers Mrs. Coventry to her neighbour, during a pause caused by the unexpected descent of the curtain on "Shirley's Neuralgic Crystal." The two girls had been depicted by Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, who is always ready for everything, even for neuralgia, and the daughter of a squire in the neighbourhood. Indeed the amount of agony the former has thrown into her face, as she wildly grapples with the pain in her head with both hands, is hardly to be surpassed.

"The play's the thing," quotes her companion, "where-with to catch the imbecility of one's friends. I quite agree with you. There may be—there generally is—a breakdown in a play; there can be nothing in a stupid performance that allows every one to stand still, and forbids them to mouth."

"Still, it's not so bad," says Mrs. Coventry, who always

doesn't agree with everybody. "There's the guessing, you know. That gives one something to do. That's difficult."

"Very," says her neighbour drily—a Mr. Cathcart, a novelist.

"Did you guess the last?"

"Did anybody?" asks he mildly. Well, somebody has at all events, because now Sir Bertram Stamer, who has declined to take part in the proceedings, cries loudly:

"Shirley's Crystal!" and the sound is taken up.

That he has been prompted by Mr. Blount from behind the curtain is known but to the favoured few.

"I wish it was over. *When* will dancing commence?" whispers a young girl to the man near her. "It is all such nonsense. I hate this kind of thing. *Such* waste of time."

("First season," thinks the man leniently. "Better able to appreciate a sit down later on.") He is, however, kind enough to humour her.

"They *will* do it, you know," says he. "Must show themselves off! Think they're a million per cent. better than the regulars on the stage, and that it's a pity somebody shouldn't know it. But this sort of thing is better than a play, you know; when amateurs give one a *play*!—" He pauses, lets his head fall forward; deepest dejection covers him.

"Well, they're going to do something else now," says the pretty girl, with a *souffron* of disgust in her tone. "How much more is there going to be of it? Why don't they give it up?"

Pears' Soap this time. The Queen Anne picture. We all know it. Here is the long-nosed Madam-Teazle-gowned dame, descending from her sedan (Miss Vandeleur, whose nose is short if anything). Here is the extra superior portly person who is handing her from the chair (Bartholomew Blount). And here is the obsequious person bowing at the door to her Majesty (Captain Stamer, who hasn't given his mind to it, and looks, not so much like a soapmaker as a lunatic at large).

"How kindly he smiles at her," says Evelyn to herself, standing at the improvised wing and watching him. "Much more kindly," with a lively satisfaction, "than she looks at him."

Every one happily guesses this at once. "There is no deception." "We all know it." The illustrious Pears is the one creature "understood of the people."

"How absurd!" says Mrs. Coventry. "Mr. Blount as a clown would be superb, but as he *is*——. Her pause is more expressive than any words could be. "And as for Captain Stamer! Now why do people go in for this sort of thing, eh?"

"Ah! if you could tell us that you could explain a great mystery," says the novelist, mildly still. "But wait, the curtain is going up; we may be finally electrified this time."

They *are*. It is Mr. Blount's own, and truly he is something to look at. Anything to exceed the joviality of the awful grin he has conjured up upon his features has surely never then or since been rivalled. The spectators cower before it. His fellow fools grow small.

He is seated behind a table, on which a giant jug (presumably filled with Bass) and a long, *long* glass, that used in my grandmother's days to be called a jelly glass, are standing. This jelly glass he is clutching feverishly with his right hand, whilst the left is lifted up on high and has in *its* clutch a most astonishing pipe filled with an even more astonishing weed, that throws out volumes of smoke without any provocation whatever. A gigantic Charles the Second hat crowns his smiling brow, whilst ruffles innumerable lie furled beneath his chin. A moustache, that would have done justice to Don Quixote, curls upwards and burrows in his eyes, whilst wrinkles innumerable—done evidently by over-burnt cork—make his face remarkably dirty. Altogether, beyond doubt he is the feature—the picture—of the evening.

Anything more distinctly silly—anything, except a village urchin, dirtier—could hardly be imagined even in a fearsome dream.

"What is it?"

"Who *can* he be?"

"Don Carlos?"

"Nonsense!"

"The Devil?"

"That *certainly*."

"Oh, *I* know—that queer picture: somebody's mixture, eh?"

"Wrong all through, but you've given the tip for all that. It's that 'Cope's' affair; what is it? Cigarettes made by English girls?"

"Oh! of *course*. Well, he *does* look a fool. If I were 'Cope' I'd summon him."

"Thank goodness he is gone," says the pretty girl, with a contemptuous flick of her fan. "A little more of this sort of thing, and——"

"Well—*here's* a little more," says her companion, as the curtain once again goes slowly up.

Certainly a charming picture this time. Such a lovely little face, smiling, roguish, set in a frame, and with only so much of it seen as comprises the head crowned by a toque, and with the mouth hidden behind a huge muff. She is indeed just peeping over the jealous fur that so cruelly conceals the laughing lips, but the brilliant, mirthful eyes make up, almost, for that loss.

There is a little silence. Everybody knows the picture, but nobody can remember the name. Society, as a rule, is not quick-witted once taken out of its own groove. And now it seems to have a little difficulty about naming this advertisement; or it is perhaps that they do not wish the charming face to be taken away too soon.

At last a solemn voice in the crowd says:

"Long live Peek and Frean's biscuits," after which there is a general laugh, the curtain comes down, and Evelyn, with a swift sigh of relief, casts her muff from her, and with it the lovely smile.

After this Mrs. Wylding-Weekes appears, looking absolutely seraphic as a nun. Not even the proverbial duck in the thunder-storm could have turned up its eyes any farther. As a delicate representation of Purity itself, she stands here, spreading, let us hope, beautiful thoughts amongst her audience.

"Ah!" says somebody with a long drawn sigh, that comes apparently from behind the farthest curtains. Later on it transpires that it is Mr. Wylding-Weekes who has given way to this sound of woe.

"The very part to suit her," says Mr. Cathcart mildly.

"Exactly my own thoughts," says Mrs. Coventry. "I have no doubt at all now that the perfume of Cherry Blossom *is* the odour of sanctity!"

"A valuable discovery," says Cathcart, laughing.

"Don't you think it ought to be soon over?" says the pretty girl sadly. "If it is to be an early affair, I don't see what time we shall have for dancing."

"Well, it is nearly over. I think this must be the last,"

safer companion, dealing consolation to her rather insincerely. He is right, however. It is the last.

It proves to be a treat kept in store for them by Mr. Blount. Against the almost tearful entreaties of his fellow actors, he has insisted upon exhibiting himself as the little boy we all know so well, who has evidently been desired by his relations to blow bubbles against his will.

Mr. Blount has undertaken the part of this melancholy little boy, and after having driven the entire household to the border of frenzy, has at last captured such garments as he fondly imagines are suited to the part. The young duke had finally been induced to part with his best suit, and there has been much letting out and much patching in, and even at the last, in spite of all stretchings, it is plain to everybody that it is dangerous to wear them, and that, in fact, at any moment the most frightful calamity may occur.

This is so thrilling, that the audience remain spellbound, waiting for what they hardly dare to name, and, indeed, so great does expectation grow, that Mr. Blount may well be excused when afterwards he declares the bubble picture was *the* event of the evening.

The bubble is made of one of those coloured bladders we see hawking in the streets in May and June, and that children buy ostensibly to play with, but in reality to stick a pin in them and see them "go pop."

This coloured toy is suspended by an invisible string from the ceiling right over Mr. Blount's head, and on it he fixes a lack-lustre eye. He is seated on a low stool, and how he got down to it without bursting all the clothes that are on him, is one of the mysteries that never have been, and never now will, I suppose, be explained.

He achieves the feat, however, and being a stout young man with the innocent blue orbs that usually belong to early childhood, manages to make a picture, that if slightly wanting in grace and beauty, is at least provocative of wild and unrestrained mirth amongst the more thoughtless ones of the audience. The more earnest members of it, however, wait in a shuddering silence for the dividing asunder of the bands and the seams that only by a miracle hold to each other.

It is over! The curtain has fallen! The dreaded catastrophe has been mercifully prevented. The county breathes again.

"Wait—wait, Blount, for Heaven's sake till I give you a hand," cries Eaton Stamer, rushing to him and lifting him slowly, carefully off the stool. "Now then, gently, *gently!* There now, like a good fellow, get out of those tights at once, and risk the explosion no further."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow. Tut! Pouf! Safe as a church. Can't think why you all——"

Here comes an ominous sound. Another—*another!*

"Oh jiminy!" shrieks Mr. Blount. He makes a desperate rush for a side door, gains it, and happily soon is lost to view.

CHAPTER XX.

EVELYN, entering the lesser ballroom that has been set apart for the rather informal dance that is to follow the tableaux, sees Mr. Crawford making his way towards her. A few yards behind him she can also see Captain Stamer, evidently bent on the same object, but so hemmed in by a little crowd that his movements are rendered necessarily slow. Mrs. Wylding-Weekes has seized upon him, and when he has with rather scant ceremony answered the conversational fire she has directed on him, it is only to find that Evelyn has given her card to Crawford, who is scribbling his name on it.

Crawford, indeed, had reached her before any one.

"May I have the pleasure of this dance?" says he, indicating the one just now commencing.

"With pleasure," says Evelyn mechanically. There is, however, such uncontrollable surprise in her tone that he finds it impossible to ignore it.

"You thought I didn't dance," says he, with a short laugh that is half-embarrassed, half-melancholy. "You think me too old for such frivolities. Yet I beg you to believe, in spite of my appearance, that I am not yet *quite* a patriarch."

It is almost an appeal.

"Oh, it is not your age," says Evelyn, flushing warmly, "I did not think of that, only—well," with a slight touch of desperation, "you don't *look* like that sort of thing."

"No?" says he. There is a slight pause; then, "you are right. Melancholy has marked me for her own. And

there is justice in her claim." His eyes are on the ground. He has suddenly, as it were, grown older, greyer. He looks at this instant one of the last creatures upon earth with whom one would seek to tread a joyous measure. His thoughts have evidently flown elsewhere; his mental vision is fixed upon some strange thing far removed from the gaiety of the hour in which his body lives. What it is, Heaven alone knows, but it disfigures the man; the gentle brightness of a moment since is gone; he looks pale, unstrung, hopeless.

"Go," says he abruptly, without lifting his eyes, "seek some more congenial companion."

"What!" says Evelyn nervously, yet with an attempt at playful reproach, "would you cancel an honourable engagement in so cavalier a fashion? You have asked me to dance this waltz with you, and dance it I will, unless you can show just cause for my not doing so." She pauses, and with a sudden sweet change of manner lays her hand upon his arm. "Mr. Crawford," says she, with a lovely kindness, "have I vexed you in any way?"

"*You!*" says he, looking up now, and with such an ill-repressed burst of emotion that it startles her. He might have said more, but just at this instant Stamer reaches them.

"Any chance for me?" asks he, looking at Evelyn.

"Too late," returns she, with a slight motion of her fan towards Crawford, who has now recovered himself and is as imperturbable as ever.

"I seem to be too late for everything, now-a-days," says Stamer, with a smile insufficiently clever to conceal the impatience he is feeling.

"Not for *everything*, my dear Eaton," says Lady Stamer, who has come up in time to hear the last remark. "There is Marian just coming in. Go and ask her, she will not refuse you." There is more meaning in her tone than in her words, which she emphasizes by a direct glance at Evelyn. Miss D'Arcy, however, is equal to the occasion; she returns the insolent glance with calm indifference, letting her eyes finally glide off to a distant part of the room.

"And you, Mr. Crawford," says Lady Stamer, with her most engaging air, which is a very leaden performance, "can I do anything for you? You dance, *of course?*" She lays so much stress on this meant-to-be-pretty speech that it is plain

to everybody that her honest conviction is that he does *not* dance. "I know the most charming partner in the world, shall I introduce you?"

"Thanks. I have been introduced already. Miss D'Arcy has given me this dance," says Crawford, with an air if possible more engaging than her own.

"Oh!" says Lady Stamer; she turns abruptly on her heel and walks away.

"A detestable woman!" says Crawford, as though impelled towards the condemnation.

"A foolish one, at least," says Evelyn, with a shrug of her white shoulders. She speaks with admirable nonchalance, but she has grown a little pale. "Well, you have committed yourself finally now," says she laughing; "you can't get out of one dance, whether you will or no."

"True," says he. "To deny myself this pleasure is out of my power. Come."

He passes his arm round her waist, and presently the dancing crowd has caught them. So much time had been lost beforehand in the idle conversation recorded, that there is barely time left to make a circuit of the room before the soft strains of the band die away into silence. Enough time has been given, however, to convince Evelyn that she has been dancing with the best waltzer she has ever met; one of the best in Europe, had she but known.

"You *can* dance!" says she with unrestrained, girlish enthusiasm, as they come to a standstill near the entrance to a large conservatory that leads in its turn to the gardens outside. If she has meant this little speech as a compliment, it fails entirely. It only impresses upon Mr. Crawford the sense of *age* that has been weighing him down all the evening—that has been weighing him down indeed ever since the first day he saw her.

"You are very kind," says he quietly, "and since I have now gained your good opinion, I shall not risk the losing of it. This is my first dance to-night, it shall be my last."

"But why?" says Evelyn, regarding him with half-reproachful eyes. "So few good dancers in the county, and the best of them to give out a fiat such as this!"

"Old men should take a back seat," says he, giving his little touch of slang with so gently humorous an air that the bitterness of the soul beneath is almost hidden. *Almost, if not quite.*

Evelyn regards him critically; she has read the little bitter note, and has let it go to her heart. It is one of her chiefest charms that she can go earnestly into a distinctly delicate situation without leaving the marks of disagreeable touches behind her.

"You are not old," says she directly, openly, thoughtfully, as if working out a new conclusion. "I used to think you were, but it was a mistake."

"Oh, no," says he smiling. His heart has taken a quicker throb, his eye brightens, youth asserts itself once more within his breast and beats back the cruel chill that despair, for years, has planted there. It is sheer folly, he tells himself, even in the midst of his fresh delight, yet very sweet withal.

"But yes, yes," cries she laughing. "Do you think I am going to be contradicted like that? Do you know," leaning a little towards him, and lifting her charming face to his with the laugh of a moment since still living in the depths of her lovely eyes, "I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself. What are you but a swindler? You come here pretending to be, and looking like—like——"

"Methusaleh?" suggests he.

"Oh, no! And you mustn't interrupt me," with a delicious affectation of petulance. "What I mean is, that you posed as a *sober* person when you came, and lo! when the opportunity comes to you, where are you in your *rôle*? Did ever sober man waltz like you?"

"Would you," says he, carried away by the freshness of her gaiety, "would you insinuate that I——"

"Pouf!" says she airily, throwing up her pretty chin, "don't make up things; you know what I mean; by sober, I would say sedate."

"Did you think I was a Quaker?" says he. "Sedate is a word that always seems to lead that way."

"There are worse things than Quakers," says she impartially. "But you are not one. No, what I would say is that your dancing has taken me by surprise; you try always—you *do* always—look so grave that——"

"You see how it is," says Crawford, interrupting her without apology; "your experience of the very aged is small. You don't often," with a smile, "favour the grand-parents of society with a dance, as you have favoured me to-night. I assure you I appreciate the exception you have made in my

favour, but——" he hesitates, and turns more directly towards her, his smile fading as he does so, "I am afraid," says he in a different tone, "that you owe me a grudge for that favour. If I had not asked you for this dance," he pauses again, as if hardly knowing how to go on, and then, "Stamer would have done so," says he, jerking out the words spasmodically.

"And?" says she interrogatively. Her face has not changed, no smallest tinge of pink has dyed it. She stands looking at him with a little suspicion of determination in her gaze, and presently it is borne in upon him that she has made up her mind to get an answer to her somewhat vague question.

"Youth desires youth," says he sententiously. "I fancied——" he pauses again.

"What?" demands she, a touch of imperiousness now in her soft tones; but even as she waits for a reply she seems to have tired of her own longing for information, and throws it from her with a little idle laugh. "Oh, I see," says she, as one might who has made a silly discovery, "you fancied I wanted to dance with Eaton! Why, say I *did* so fancy; the night is long; I shall still dance with him, no doubt. But all that about him is mere supposition. You speak of youth; he is not the only youthful person in the room."

"Not by many a one."

"Neither am I," laughing. "I don't conserve all the youth to myself."

"You conserve the ideal of it," says he gravely.

"That is your kind prejudice, or else your pretty compliment," says she, reddening faintly. "You are not sensible; you should take things as they *are*. As for Eaton, he has plenty of common sense, and he has secured an admirable partner; see," with a slight shrug of her shoulders, "he is dancing with Miss Vandeleur."

"I see," says Crawford gravely, who has noticed, if she has not, that Stamer's eyes are given to her, and not to his partner. "Will you come out?" says he presently, seeing her refuse two or three invitations to dance. "The night is lovely, and it is stifling in here."

"Yes, let us go somewhere, I can scarcely breathe," says she, rising quickly and passing into the conservatory, before he has time to give her his arm.

"But not before you cover your neck from the night air,"

says Crawford anxiously. "Ah! here is something that will suit our purpose." He lifts a white delicate silk wrap from a lounge and throws it round her slight form. "Now to brave the elements," says he with a smile.

Evelyn laughs; a clear pretty laugh that reaches Stamer as he enters the conservatory by another door. He stands still involuntarily and looks at her; perhaps the intensity of his regard compels hers, because without knowing why, she at once turns her eyes to his. As she sees him, she smiles rather faintly, and is indeed so altogether absorbed by a thought that has been troubling her for many days, and has had to-night a spur, that it is not until he has gone by her, that she remembers her smile received no acknowledgment.

Drawing the silken covering more closely round her, as though to account for the slight shiver that runs through her frame, she follows Crawford down the stone steps of the verandah to the moonlit gardens beneath.

CHAPTER XXL

THE night is half-luminous, half-lost in gloom. Patches of purest light lie here and there, whilst beyond them is a darkness that may be felt. Now and again in a little startling fashion, tall lilies pale as death break through this blackness, only with the effect of accentuating it. Overhead great banks of inky clouds bar the heavens, hanging betwixt earth and sky so heavily, that almost one looks for them to drop and crush the sleeping nature beneath into one ruined whole. Above and below them run light paths of moon-touched blue, out of which gleam a myriad stars, the more brilliant because of the shadows that surround them.

Now the queen of heaven is hidden, and now again she floats into view, lightly, uncertainly,

"With the mild gait of an ungrown moon."

She seems pale and powerless, and only on such a path and such, sheds her keen rays. To-night her wings seem clipped.

The gardens are wrapt in a dewy silence; only the breath of flowers stirs the air. The quiet way that Crawford and Evelyn have chosen seems to have carried them far from the laughing, chattering crowd within; far too, from those

who, like themselves, have sought the coolness of the night.

How calm the world seems in this still hour! How passionless! So still indeed

"That we can only say of things, *they be!*"

Scarcely a word has been spoken by either of them since they left the house; just at first a commonplace had been uttered and responded to, and after that the restful silence of real friendship had been sought by both. Crawford, buried in thought, paces the shaven turf with downbent head; Evelyn is thinking too.

"What a strange night," says he at last, stopping short within a moonlit circle, and glancing round him. "Half gleam, half gloom, just like a happy life."

"Happy!" repeats she with quick surprise, and as if eager to remind him. "Happy! and *half gloom?*"

"Better than gloom unbroken," with a smile that saddens her unconsciously.

"You think then—you believe——" says she, breaking off incoherently. "Oh! it is too hard a belief; and as for gloom unbroken! *no* one could live through that."

"Yet some do."

"Oh no, no!" cries she sharply, as if hurt. "Life is given us without our asking for it—is it fair that the gift thus pressed upon us, should be one of woe?"

"It is a mystery," says he in a low tone. "But one thing time has shown me. To be *half* happy in this world of ours, is to be blessed above one's fellows."

"You are out of spirits to-night," says the girl gently, "else you would not talk so sadly. Ever since you asked me to dance I have noticed it. No, no," quickly, "I don't mean to insinuate that you found your misery in that one waltz, but I fear—I fear you have heard bad news to-day."

"There is no bad news that could touch me," says he wearily. "I almost wish there was. But I am safe from that at least."

Yet even as he speaks the words, he checks himself, as one might who has made a chance discovery. *Is* he so sure? Is there no deeper depth to be sounded—no fiercer pain that yet may torture him? He conquers this newborn fear, yet the shadow of it clinging to him suggests his next remark.

"How many friends you seem to have," says he, "and all *old* friends. That is a charm, I think."

"You mean that I have known everybody here ever since I can remember anything? That is hardly a desirable thing, is it?"

"I don't know. It seems so to me. You came here then when you were very young?" It seems sweet to him to learn any, the very smallest, details of the early days of her still early life.

"I was seven, I think. But I was wrong if I gave you the impression that I remember nothing before that. I remember a great deal. *Too much*——" she pauses.

"You mean ——?"

"I remember my father," says she with sudden abruptness. "I never seem to forget that. It stands out so distinctly. Just as if it were yesterday."

A profound pity for her fills his breast. That guilty father; whatever he had done, there is no doubt but that the shadow of his crime has darkened his daughter's life.

"I know nothing," says he softly. "But if the memory of him distresses you, why dwell upon it."

"Ah! why should I not. I would scorn myself if I forgot. And besides it always seems to me that some day—some day"—she stops, and leaning forward looks intently at Crawford, though (as he knows) without seeing him—"I shall——"

What?" says Crawford almost inaudibly. He too is leaning forward; an unaccountable, an almost maddening desire to hear her next words has taken possession of him.

"*Avenge him!*" breathes she in a clear whisper.

He draws back as if struck. A shudder runs through him. It is only the sensation of a moment, but it is sufficiently strong to be a real feeling, and to enable him to smile at it afterwards. Poor child! No doubt this erring father had been to her an idol, and is now a martyr; a being wronged by his creatures; an innocent man hounded into exile by a scurrilous society.

"Do not dwell too much upon it," entreats he again. "Of course I know nothing, but——"

"No; and I cannot tell you. I have never spoken of it, never. And even though you, I feel, are to be trusted—still, I cannot."

"I am glad you feel like that towards me," says he very quietly, though his heart has begun to beat with painful rapidity. Perhaps warned by it he rises from his seat and

holds out to her his hand. "Come, I dare not run the risk of wearying you. Let me take you back to the ball-room."

"If you will," says she, rising too. "But you never weary me. I like to be with you." She says this naïvely, earnestly, without a suspicion of coquetry. However she may treat younger men, with Crawford she is always honest. And indeed it is now only the bare truth she speaks. When with him a sense of rest, of comfort, falls upon her. Many are afraid of this cold, self-contained unsociable man, but not Evelyn, perhaps because to her alone his heart has gone out.

He might have made some answer to her kindly words, but that at this instant the sound of voices, raised and wrangling, reaches them. Nearer and nearer they come, destroying the ideality of the night, and threatening destruction to sentiment of any kind.

Crawford casts an astonished glance towards the direction from which the voices seem to come, but Miss D'Arcy maintains an unmoved demeanour.

"It is only the Wylding-Weekes," says she with the melancholy resignation of one who knows what to expect and is used to it. "They are always quarrelling. One grows accustomed to it of course, but I always wish they wouldn't do it so *loud*. It is so unnecessary and is such a pity."

"It is," says Crawford drily.

"They don't care who hears them, or where they are," says Evelyn plaintively. "The last time it was in the church porch, and we were all there. Some strange clergyman had come to preach a sermon for the Hottentots, or some other unpleasant people, and he lost his place in his sermon, and Mr. Wylding-Weekes declared it was all because poor Mrs. Wylding-Weekes had been—been——"

She hesitates and turns a lively crimson.

"Well?" says Crawford.

"It's a horrid word *I* think," says Miss D'Arcy, red still, but taking her courage in both hands; "but I assure you he said she had been '*ogling*' the missionary. I'm sure it wasn't true. But he made a dreadful scene, and we were all shocked."

"They are coming this way. Let us escape with our lives while we may," says Crawford, and together they speed

through the scented shrubberies, until once more they find themselves on the moonlit walk before the house.

"We have evaded that danger," says Crawford, "but I'm afraid not without evil results. Your shawl is doing anything but its duty; and there is always a little chill in the air on such nights as these. Let me fasten it for you."

He lifts the white silk shawl and carefully winds it round her. To Stamer, coming down the steps of the conservatory, it seems as though he is encircling her with his arm, and that without rebuke. He turns abruptly back again and re-enters the ball-room.

Evelyn and Crawford, innocent of the fact that any one has seen them, and still more innocent of the fact that any one could possibly have misunderstood the situation, regain the ball-room in their turn, where Evelyn is speedily seized upon and carried away into the waltzing whirlpool.

There is no doubt about her being the big success of the night; Lady Stamer, looking on, looks grim beneath this knowledge; Mrs. Vaudrey grows gay beneath it. As for the colonel he takes it as a matter of course; who should be admired, if not his pretty Evelyn?

But Evelyn herself, in spite of her triumph, is conscious of a sense of loss; she feels puzzled too, and hurt. The best men in the room have been figuratively at her feet, and yet, he—Eaton has not once asked her to dance. He, her oldest friend. It is so strange, so unaccountable. What has she done that he should treat her so? It is now very perilously close to the end of the evening, and still he holds aloof, not even deigning, as by chance they meet each other in room or gallery, to cast a look at her.

A good many people have already taken their departure; the colonel amongst them. The fact that he has gone has made Evelyn feel even more lonely. A half wish that she had cut short her visit at the Castle and gone with him is oppressing her; and with it a sense of anger that he should have left her so soon. If he had waited she *might* have gone with him. But he had been in such a horrid hurry.

For the first time in her life indeed she is unjust to the poor colonel, who had come there in the lowest spirits and sorely against his will, simply to please her. Accustomed to go to bed at ten sharp, he had sat resignedly on until half-past one, yawning carefully but busily behind one of

the biggest hands in Europe, until his wife coming to the rescue, had carried him off. It had indeed gone so far with him that it would have been a case of sheer brutality on the part of any one who had sought to keep him longer from the desired couch.

Yes; it will soon be all over. Others, following the example set by the colonel, have vanished into the night, and are now several miles nearer their homes. The room is thinning. The end will come, and she will not know how she has offended Eaton. A shadow has fallen into her pretty eyes, her lips take a downward curve. Making a little excuse to her partner, she dismisses him, and sinking upon a friendly seat, lets a little sigh escape her.

The knowledge that some one has come up behind her and is standing there close to her without speaking, causes her to turn and look up.

It is Eaton, at last.



CHAPTER XXII.

"PERHAPS, now your engagements are a little slack, I may hope for a dance," says he regarding her with a smile that he hardly means to be agreeable.

The certainty that a swift warm colour has rushed into her white cheeks so angers her that the coldness with which she would naturally have answered him is increased four fold.

"Too late again," says she, giving him the frugalest of smiles. "Twice in one night to be behind time is to be unfortunate."

"Engaged?" questions he with lifted brows.

"No. Only tired."

"Ah!" He throws into this harmless monosyllable an amount of meaning that enrages her. "Well—of course—I really hardly *hoped*, you know, for a more favourable answer."

"You did not hope at all, perhaps," with an indolent lowering of her lids. "If so, why pretend you did?"

"That is a little rude, isn't it?"

"Is it?" indifferently.

"*Very* rude," with emphasis that suggests anger.

"It is very rude of you to tell me so," says she, lifting her

eyes to his at last with a defiant expression in them. "Why do you speak to me like this." She waits, as if for his answer, and gaining none, beyond the steady glance he gives her, her whole mood changes, and sinks at once into a bare naturalness. "Why didn't you ask me to dance?" demands she straightly and without a suspicion of any *arrière pensée*.

"Why should I? It would have been presumption on my part. I could see how well amused you were. No wonder you plead fatigue as an excuse for getting rid of me, even at this the eleventh hour. The flower of the aristocracy," with a grim laugh, "were at your feet. The essence of this year's wit and talent followed hard upon their heels, and besides all this you had the wisdom of the past. What was I amongst so many? I took counsel with myself and wisely determined upon effacement."

He has thrown so much point into that slight remark of his about the wisdom of age that she catches it and harps upon it.

"What do you mean by age?" asks she with a little gesture that implies how scornfully she has cast aside all his other insinuations.

"Crawford," replies he bluntly.

There is a lengthened pause. Once Miss D'Arcy lifts her head as if to speak, and then refrains from words, as though to give expression to her thoughts is a little difficult.

"He is not so old as you think him," says she at last, as though driven to this speech through a sense of loyalty.

"No? How old do you imagine I think him?"

"I haven't as yet found time to go into it," says she with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

"There is so little time for anything nowadays, one shouldn't blame you. Perhaps, however, he is not so young as you think him."

"I don't think him young," with a little frown.

"Don't you really?" with a malevolent sprightliness. "I quite thought you did. And no wonder too. To see him waltz was a revelation. It brought to mind the Wandering Jew; the secret of perpetual youth and all the rest of it. He is an astonishing person. He might pose as almost any age. I *had* regarded him as Merlin, but after to-night's capers, I must moderate my opinion by a hundred years or so. Still it seems a pity that so wise and learned a seignior as he appears to be should give way to the frivolities

that distinguish this effete period. If he *must* dance, why not devote himself to the dignified squares? Looking back through the many decades he has been privileged to see, he must naturally regard our ungraceful dances as being altogether out of it when compared with the stately minuet, the——"

"I suppose you think you are very amusing," says Miss D'Arcy rising ruthlessly and giving him a glance that should have withered him. "Mr. Crawford may be the oldest man on earth for all I know; but at least he is a gentleman."

"Which I am not?" smiling still, but with pale lips and angry eyes.

"Why should you say that?"

"That is what you think."

"You know nothing of my thoughts."

"Oh yes, I do; I know some of them."

Matters might have grown still more complicated but that just at this moment the duchess, who has been speeding the parting guest, comes up to them followed by Mr. Blount. She is evidently in her element amongst these simple country folk and is looking as jolly as a sand-boy.

"Been quite a success, hasn't it?" says she genially, including Evelyn, whom she likes, in the conversation, but really addressing herself to Stamer. As a rule she always addresses herself to men. "It has gone off tremendously well, eh?"

"The pleasantest night I have known," says Stamer promptly and with enthusiasm. All the enthusiasm is meant for Evelyn, who receives it with an impassive countenance.

"Such fun as it's been!" says the duchess with a merry little laugh. "And I'm glad that *everybody* has been pleased."

"Everybody, except Miss Morley," says Mr. Blount in a tone of reproach.

"Oh! as for her, poor girl, if she *will* come gowned like that and with such manners, how is one to help her?" says the duchess with a shake of her big head. "Society hasn't arranged for that sort *yet*."

"She has a perfect skin."

"Yes, I know. But what a waste of good material to give it to her."

"Still it's something to look at," says Mr. Blount mildly. "So many of 'em are horrid. There's Lady Mildred

Haversham for example! Makes one creep to look at *her*. Complexion like oatmeal, by Jove!

"But she's so *good*," says the duchess emphatically, as though a little correction is necessary.

"Oh, I daresay," says Mr. Blount unabashed. "They must be something, you know. If they're handsome, they're bad, and if they're ugly they're good. I don't believe in that, you know. Lady Mildred looks as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, but I've heard——"

The duchess puts up a warning finger.

"You see we none of us care for your hearings, Batty," says Stamer with a short laugh.

"Well, anyhow, it's a pity that all saints must be hideous," says Mr. Blount, who is equal to most emergencies. "One hears of the beauty of holiness, but where is it? Lady Mildred's out of *that* running anyway."

"You are mundane," says the duchess with an irresistible laugh; "you will not look beyond the cloud that hides our petty failings. If you did you would see purity and charity and faith, and all such lovely things. But to come back to the more prosaic present, if you will not admire solid worth, you will surely admire Mrs. Wylding-Weekes!"

"Oh! how pretty she has looked to-night," says Evelyn eagerly. The tribute to the charms of Mrs. Wylding-Weekes is so honest that the duchess regards her with interest. "And what a gown."

"A heavenly frock," says Mr. Blount genially. "A perfect sweetmeat. One longed to devour it. It was indeed so small that one could easily get it down. There was a good deal of Mrs. Wylding-Weekes if one remembers correctly, but very little of the frock. Still, what there *was*!"

"Was very special," supplements Stamer mildly. "Much should be conceded to that."

"Not *much*, but certainly a little," says the duchess; she moves away as she speaks, but looks back again kindly at Evelyn.

"You look tired," says she. "Why wait for the very last? Go to bed, dear child."

"Thank you," says Evelyn with a faint smile; she has grasped the idea with avidity. Oh! to be *alone*, to be free from those who come and go. She gives her hostess a little gracious inclination and makes a step or two towards the nearest doorway.

"Good-night," says Mr. Crawford, holding out his hand. He has come to them without their knowing it, and now stands talking to Evelyn and still holding her hand.

"I say, she seems to affect old 'Tot-and-go-one,'" says Mr. Blount, giving Stamer a playful nudge. It is badly received. There are indeed moments when Mr. Blount's good spirits grow to the height of aggressiveness.

"You heard the advice the duchess gave to Miss D'Arcy," says Stamer with a lowering brow. "I'd advise you to adopt it. *Go to bed!*"

"Not if I know it," says Mr. Blount cheerfully. "I'm good for many a smoke yet. Go to bed yourself, and take *my* advice. You're in about as bad form as ever I met. Who's been sitting on you?"

"Pshaw," says Stamer, turning impatiently away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

To turn away, however, is only to meet Mr. Blount later on in the smoking-room, where that youth greets him with a cheerful laugh.

"How are you, Dynamite?" says he; "given up exploding yet? You're a credit to your year, *you* are; no end of 'go' in *you*."

It is quite plain that Mr. Blount has himself been "*going it*" amongst the champagne bottles, mildly as yet, but with a generous promise as to the future, so far as this night extends. As a rule, it must be conceded to him, he is abstemious, but on this occasion only—led astray by the tableaux no doubt, or demoralized by his "tights"—he has given way, and fallen a prey to vice in the shape of sundry drinks, all fatally mixed.

"I wonder where you're going," says his cousin with a rather disgusted glance at him. "To the pump, I hope. Do you all the good in the world."

"Awful rude chap that," says Mr. Blount with serious gravity, turning to his companion and indicating Eaton by a wave of his thumb, Eaton having moved away a step or two, but being scarcely out of hearing. "Tell you what," laying hold of the companion's button-hole by way of being emphatic, but in reality to steady himself. "He don't

know how to conduct himself, *he* don't. You should have seen him a while ago with the loveliest girl in the world. You know her, Raymond, *lovely* girl! Miss D'Arcy, don't ye know, little girl, big eyes——"

"Look here, Blount!" says Captain Stamer, turning suddenly and advancing on Batty with violent anger both in voice and gesture. "You will drop that topic. Do you *hear*! You will not mention that name again in this room at any time. Do you *understand*?"

His nostrils dilate as he speaks, and it is evident to the man standing next Batty that he is subduing his temper by a supreme effort only.

"Oh! get along," says Mr. Blount vaguely. And as Stamer gets along he gives vent to his feelings audibly. "Beastly temper," says he. "Just like all the Stamers. Just like old woman. Know old woman? Confounded bore she is. I saw her one day do a thing that——"

But here he is hustled along by the man in attendance, and the last unique anecdote about Lady Stamer is lost to posterity.

Eaton, with a sense of dejection, moves to the farther end of the room and flings himself upon a low lounge. His thoughts are bitter; the more so that they are scarcely definable. He had desired to dance with Evelyn all the evening, and has only himself to thank that his desire was not fulfilled. From that first moment when she had told him he was "too late," because of her engagement to Crawford, he had allowed distrust of her to enter his heart. Not distrust so far as he himself was concerned, as no love passages had ever occurred between them, but distrust of her honesty, her uprightness, her loyalty towards her better self. That old man was rich, could she—*could* she——. Women—even good women—had sometimes done such things.

This faint disbelief in her had been fanned into a hot flame during the evening. There was that moment in the garden when he had had his arm round her without repulse. It might have been to fasten her cloak—it might *not*. It hardly, bad as it was, hurt him so much as the whispers that stirred the air wherever he moved. "*Such* a match for her!" "A girl without a penny!" "He was perfectly infatuated!" "She had only to say the word." "Those old men always bowed at the shrine of extreme youth, &c."

All this cut him to the heart. Yet *why* he hardly yet knew. She was so old a friend. He had known her as child, as girl, as—— He hardly realized that she was now a woman.

The fact that his cigar has burned down to his fingers causes him to wake from his unpleasant reverie. He starts into a more upright position, and a knowledge that Bartholomew is once again distinguishing himself.

That doughty person has just been holding a lively argument with a rather smart young subaltern from the cavalry barracks at Uxton, about the service, of which it would be plain to the meanest capacity that Mr. Blount knows absolutely nothing.

Being, however, in such an elevated mood that all things seem possible to him, and all human knowledge his own, he fights his way vigorously through the most unconquerable statements, proclaiming himself victor after each crushing defeat. The cavalry man is growing irate; Batty more bumptious. He has now forgotten himself completely in the heat of the battle, and has begun to pound generously upon the table before him. He has also forgotten how many brandies and sodas he has imbibed—which is fatal to his manners.

At last, matters coming to a climax, the cavalry man rises, and casting an indignant glance at him flings himself across the room and subsides into an armchair—and murderous inclinations.

Thus deserted, Mr. Blount sinks into a pleasing reverie. It is so soothing that it leads him up to the point of a rousing snore, when unhappily a name catching his attention he grows once more terribly alive.

"The younger Miss Balsam is the best dancer I know."

"Ah! *there's* a girl for you," says Mr. Blount, rising with almost tearful enthusiasm, and straightway falling into Sir Bertram's lap.

"I say—look where you're going to, will you?" says Sir Bertram, with lazy annoyance.

"Awful good girl that," goes on Mr. Blount, beautifully regardless of the late disaster. He makes a truly remarkable journey across the room to where the younger Miss Balsam's approver is standing. "I'd shoot fellow said word 'gainst that girl. She's awful fond of me—that girl. She gave me flower out of her bouquet. Bewful bouquet.

"I'll cherish it," slapping his breast to the utter destruction of the flower if it *does* repose there, and this time nearly taking a header into the fireplace. "Cherish it f'rever."

"Oh, come now, Batty! that's regularly going it, you know," says Sir Bertram. "Up to this I have always been able to admire your strict adherence to truth. Don't deviate from the right path. Hitherto it has always been, 'she allowed me to *take* a flower.' Don't you think you ought to keep yourself to that?"

"No, sir. *No*. Gave it to me, I said. Gave it to me, *it is*. Any man contr'dict me?" with a warlike glare all round—a sort of come-on-with-a-rush expression, that is perhaps a trifle marred by the fact that one lock of his hair on the right side has taken upon itself to stand perfectly upright. It is impossible to say why, but it at once gives him the air of an angry cockatoo.

"We'd be afraid, Batty," says a dark young man from behind a cloud of smoke.

"I have it here," says Mr. Blount, again slapping his breast, and this time finding himself most unexpectedly perched on the knee of an elderly and distinguished general, who gives him a furious push. "Cherish it f'rever!"

"It's a long time," says the dark young man, with a profound sigh.

"Gen'l'men," says Mr. Blount, gazing round him, "there's only one thing I regret. That I can't love that girl as she loves me. Would if I could, but can't. *Fact* is, there's *ano'r* girl!"

Tragic start on the part of dark young man, and sudden attention on the part of Eaton Stamer.

"Lovely girl. Alien land, but lovely girl. Enemies to ole England, but land of lovely girl for all that. I'm willing to forgive her that. Some of you know her, gen'l'men—some o' you don't; but no names. Smoking room, ye know; bad form. But when I say she's Irish you will unnerstan' that——"

"Batty," says Eaton Stamer, flinging his cigar into a tray, and advancing on his cousin with a pale face. "You have had too much champagne. Go to bed."

"Go to bed yourself," roars Mr. Blount indignantly, "Champagne! Who said champagne, eh? You're drunk, sir—that's what *you* are."

"Quite right. Go it, Batty. So he is. Any one can see

it by his eye. We can all see it. For shame, Stamer! Oh, fie, fie!"

"You're shamefully drunk, sir," says Mr. Blount with righteous disgust. Here the dark young man, unable to resist it, gives Stamer a slight trip, that lands the latter rather heavily in an armchair.

"Loo' at him! loo' at him!" exclaims Mr. Blount triumphantly, pointing him out to public scorn with a rather uncertain forefinger. "Oh! what a *horrid* sight he is. Y'ought to be ashamed of yourself, Eaton. Wha'll your mother say?" Immense sensation!

"Wha' indeed!" says the dark young man.

"Go 'way, sir," continues Mr. Blount, still overflowing with virtuous anger. "You're not fit for 'specable sc'ity. Go 'way. Bed's bes' place for *you*."

"So it is," says Eaton promptly. "But in my present condition I don't quite see how I am to get there. Will you play the good Samaritan, Batty?" It seems to him that here is a good opportunity of getting rid of Batty and his maudlin reminiscences of scenes and people best forgotten in his present state. Just a moment since there had been a very agony of fear in his mind lest *her* name should have been desecrated—should have been uttered in all this smoke, and——

"Anything for frien'," says Mr. Blount nobly; "though I mus' say, Eaton, I har'ly like to be seen with you in your presen' state; it's," virtuously, "not a nice state!"

"I am quite alive to it," says Eaton penitently. Under pretence of being taken in charge by him, he tucks his arm into Mr. Blount's, and having got a firm clutch of him conveys that belligerent youth through the room, out of the door, and upstairs to his room. On the threshold he gives him a gentle push and, closing the door, leaves him to the sleep of the just.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"CHUCK, chuck, chuck!" calls Miss D'Arcy at the top of her musical voice, that has just a suspicion of the brogue about it.

The world is two days older; yesterday Miss D'Arcy's

visit to the Castle came to an end ; to-day she is once more resting in the bosom of her family—hardly resting, however.

“Chuck, chuck, chuck !” cries she, and not in vain she pleads. The words—or sounds, rather—have hardly passed her lips when twenty-six hens and fourteen ducks, one cock and a drake, rush simultaneously from every outhouse and barn in the yard and scurry to where she is standing, a plate of broken bread in her hand.

She is dressed for the fray. A pale blue cotton gown enwraps her dainty figure—a frock rather the worse for its many tubbings ; a huge white hat, scarcely immaculate as to the brim, covers her head. The consumptive droop that time has taught it to take on the left side is now so pronounced that to look at you she has to tilt her head to the right side and glance up at you from under it. Even under these equivocal circumstances she is adorable.

So thinks Mr. Crawford, who, having heard at the hall-door that “Miss Evelyn” is in the yard, has swiftly betaken himself there, and is now declaring himself to her, hat in hand.

“Put it on—put it on !” cries she carefully. “The sun is surpassing itself to-day. Did you see the colonel—or auntie ? No ? Oh !”—preparing to drop the broken bread *en masse* upon her dependants, who are gobbling and cackling at her feet—“I’ll take you to them.”

“I beg you won’t,” says Mr. Crawford, the ungracious truth bursting from him in an unwary moment—a moment that seems to threaten the heavenly chance of a *tête-à-tête* with her ; “that is—er—it would be cruel, wouldn’t it, to deprive these hungry creatures of their food ?”

“Well, I was going to give it to them all together,” says Miss D’Arcy ; “but they’re so greedy that if I once dropped it the old ones would take everything and leave the little chicks without a crumb. If”—looking at him hopefully—“you are not really in a hurry to see the colonel, I’ll stay and give it to them by degrees.”

“I’m in no hurry,” says Mr. Crawford. Washington himself couldn’t have outdone him this time.

“Now, watch that old grey hen,” says Miss D’Arcy. She flings, as she speaks, a bit of bread to the veteran in question, and in a second a very street rabble of hens are upon it and her, trying to despoil her of her rightful due. The old grey one, however, sticks to her prize, and picking it up makes off with it to a distant dunghill, legs flying in all directions

and tail half-fanned. She is pursued by the vigilant army, who seem determined to get that bit of bread or die.

Presently, seeing a chance of getting a moment's pick at it before her pursuers can come up with her, the old grey hen lays down her treasure and dabs at it with her beak. One or two hasty morsels are thus obtained, and she is beginning to grasp the delights of it when—chut!—they have come up with her. “The Philistines are upon thee, Samson!”

Up goes the cherished crust again, held tightly in her beak, and away once more she flies for her life, the enemy in full cry behind her.

To lay down the bread again and have another peck at it to be again waylaid—to snatch it once more, and once more distance her adversaries only to be overtaken in the middle of another meal—is the work of the next two minutes. Now she is nearly caught; now her old legs stand her in good stead; again round the water-butt that stands in the middle of the yard she dashes, making a last attempt at solitude and dinner, when, alas! the big white cock—the lord of the farmyard—joins in the chase, seizes the coveted morsel, and, regardless of the cries of the old grey mother, deliberately bestows it on his favourite sultana, whilst the others look on, and, joining cause with the robbed one, seek at every chance to rend it from her.

Nothing so greedy as a hen except an ex-Cabinet minister.

Here Miss D'Arcy sees fit to rush to the rescue.

“Oh, aren't they *disgraceful*!” cries she, and then descends with wrathful visage right upon the struggling crowd, scattering consternation as she goes. “Hi! hi!” cries she; “cush! cushion!” The language is evidently one borrowed from the darkest ages, but, strange to say, it is one known to the hen. This might establish a belief in the intelligence of the hen that has long lain dormant. The hen, as a rule, is not regarded as a creature overflowing with intellect, though, in the face of the fact that she, and she alone, can satisfactorily uproot an entire garden in the course of one half hour, that theory seems to fall to the ground. It would take me a whole day to do it—or you.

“Oh! did you ever *see* such wretches?” cries Miss D'Arcy breathlessly, her pretty face grown pink, the old hat now being much to one side. The sultana has held on to

the crust, and is leading her a dance amongst the carts, and ploughs, and harrows that, as a rule, adorn the centre of the colonel's yard. Mr. Crawford has joined in the chase, and is trying to circumvent the sultana; but in vain is his weak endeavour. Right under his legs she slips, cackling furiously, though how she does it with the crust in her mouth is more than mortal knoweth. This shows the artfulness of the hen. There is really hardly anything she *cannot* do in the aggravating line.

"Now—*now* you have her! Oh, *why* didn't you catch her?" says Miss D'Arcy, so reproachfully that Crawford feels he has for ever and all lowered himself in her esteem. "There she was in your very hands, and you missed her! Oh, now—*now*. *There* she is!—*Here* she is, in the corner! Hah!"—making a dive, and succeeding at last in catching the sultana, and taking the crust from her. "*Now* learn to have proper manners! Little wretch—little demon! What did you mean by it? Oh!"—struggling for breath and for laughter—"what a chase it has been. Ha, ha, ha! you didn't anticipate this when——"

She trips over a stone as she speaks; Crawford, frightened, puts out his arms and saves her from a fall; still holding her (oh, what a little light and lovely burden!) he grows astonished and a little alarmed by her silence, and looking under the old, old hat, finds her still speechless with laughter.

Her merry eyes meet his; the dewy parted lips, rose-red, smile up at him. What a sweet, *sweet* child it is! A heavy sigh breaks from Mr. Crawford's heart.

"I thought—I feared you were hurt," says he gravely.

"Oh, no," standing up as slim and straight as a willow wand. "It was only that stone—that——" she comes to a dead stop; her eyes grow large, and fixed upon the opposite side of the yard. "Why! There's Eaton," says she.

It is Eaton indeed. He is standing perfectly still, gazing back at her. He is quite a long way off, but not so far that the late tableau could be unseen by him. A sudden rush of the most unjust anger against Crawford fills her breast for an instant; an instant only. The touch of rugged inborn honesty that characterizes her comes to her help at once, and forbids the petulance she might have encouraged. Mr. Crawford had saved her from a fall. He had done her a service. A person looking on, and not understanding,

might of course——. But even if Eaton did so misunderstand, what was it to him? Nothing. Nothing at all! Why should she consider him? Why should she fear his——. *Fear!* Why should she fear any one?

To say a thing takes time, to think it but the flash of a second.

"How d'ye do?" cries Miss D'Arcy gaily, calling out to Stamer with perhaps a slightly exaggerated friendliness. It is not always easy to look as innocent as one feels.

"How d'ye do?" calls Stamer back again, but without making a movement in her direction. He waves his hand, lifts his hat, and continues his way to the house. He had come in by the yard gate, a short cut for the colonel's familiars. It is to be presumed that Stamer's salutation was meant for both Evelyn and her companion, but his eyes had been directed towards Evelyn only, and not friendly eyes either.

"You will find the colonel in his den," says Miss D'Arcy with a final attempt at unconcern that fails miserably.

"Thanks—thanks. Don't let me put you out. I dare say I'll find him," says Captain Stamer with overpowering anxiety to save her trouble. He moves on again, but looks back when he comes to the corner, as though compelled to do so very much against his will by some hidden force.

"Marian is in the drawing-room," says he in a tone that he fondly but erroneously believes to be nothing if not amicable. He waves his hand again, determined to be pleasant to the last, but once out of sight a frown settles on his brow. He had come down to-day—had entered by the yard way expecting, hoping, to find Evelyn as usual feeding her chicks, and——. Well, so he *had* found her!

It is really scandalous that her people should let her drift into complications with that man. A man a world too old for her. A man of whom nobody knew anything except that he belonged to the Suffolk Crawfords. It is all very well to belong to a decent family, but what of the man himself—his antecedents, his character? That hang-dog look of his would condemn him anywhere. Good heavens, would a man whose character would bear inspection be so deadly silent about himself, his past, his present? Yet, after all, who had asked him a question? Who had sought to probe the secrets of his life? Not one. Stamer walking along with discontent growing in his breast is compelled to

acknowledge this truth ; not without a saving clause, however, by which he may still cling to his disbelief in this stranger who has fallen into their midst from heaven knows where. Would a man guiltless of unpleasant passages in his past be so wrapped up in an armour of reserve of such threefold strength ? A thousand times, no.

Still full of the darkest surmisings about Crawford, he enters the house, to find Marian delighting Mrs. D'Arcy with little kindly bits of gossip about the Castle, as well as she *can*, considering that Mr. Blount, who has dropped in casually, is also most eager to impart *his* information on the subject.

CHAPTER XXV.

MEANTIME Evelyn has been faring but badly. As Eaton turned that corner the smile died from her face.

"Come," says she, now turning to Crawford, who is quite unconscious of the smouldering fires in two young breasts. "Come, we must make *haste*. Marian is in the drawing-room ; she will be wondering where I am." And here she looks up at Crawford in a little scared sort of way. "Was I—am I—looking very untidy ?" asks she, putting up her hands to her head in a rather distracted fashion.

Her manner is confidential. She is evidently waiting breathless for his decision. He, not catching the thread that lies beneath, feels his heart beat the faster for this sweet token of her friendship for him. To him it seems that she is anxious to look her best for Marian. Alas ! Marian is not just now in one of her thoughts.

"You look—all right," says he, cursing himself inwardly in that his long seclusion from society has taught him no gentler ways of speech. Oh, to be a courtier of the olden days for just this *once* ! Had he known it, however, Miss D'Arcy is far better satisfied with his blunt approval than though he had poured forth on her a flood of courtly compliment.

"And my hair ?" says she. "It *is* rough now, isn't it ? It's always a worry more or less, but," with a nervous laugh, "after that chase of ours——"

"I can see no fault," says he.

"Not really ?" pressing down the rebellious locks with

both small brown hands, and giving him as reward for his comfortable opinion a brilliant smile. "Well, come along. But," stopping short, "this bib now"—indicating the huge apron that envelops her small person—"this won't do, eh?"

"I should think Miss Vandeleur, being such a friend, would not mind the bib," says he, laughing, as much at her, as at the childish title for the homely garment that covers her.

"Marian?" says she vaguely, as if not quite understanding—and then fortunately recovers herself. "Oh!" says she by way of giving herself time to think of her next move. "*Marian!* She wouldn't care, but—it's horrid to be dirty at any time; and that last skirmish *has* spoiled its pristine beauty, hasn't it?" holding up a corner of the apron that indeed is considerably the worse for the engagement now happily at an end. But even victors suffer sometimes. "Good heavens! It is a perfect rag," says she. "He—she—they are *all* in the drawing-room, and they will be staring at the door until I come. Mr. Crawford," turning upon him with a little burst of audacious coquetry, "do you love me?"

It is so sudden that Crawford falls back before it. Fortunately she has not calculated on an answer. She has not indeed taken him into consideration in a serious sense at all.

"Because if you do," says she, "you can save me. Run into the drawing-room, say anything you like first, but assure them afterwards that I am coming. Oh! you *will*! How good of you! But stay"—frantically this, as she sees him prepared to fly through the yard to do her bidding—"wait one moment, just to untie this string, will you?" indicating by a wriggling of her neck the long tapes of the body part of "the bib" that she, with both her hands, has failed to undo. "Oh! it's grown into a beastly knot," says she, still struggling with the tapes with both arms stretched over her head to the back of her neck. "Just for aggravation's sake, I do believe. You'll be able to manage it, and do hurry, won't you?"

She leans towards him, and bends her shapely neck. There seems to be no smallest doubt in her mind as to his being able to free her from the obnoxious "bib."

Crawford, trembling for his reputation, takes the knot in

his fingers. It might in itself have been an easy job to undo it, but when the eyes obstinately wander to tiny rippling curls that lie round a soft white neck—to the tender, dainty skin on which those curls lie, the untying of the simplest knot becomes a task impossible as that of Sisyphus.

Crawford's hand trembles, yet it is with more expedition than a younger man might have used that he brings his work to completion. To linger purposely over it would have seemed to him an unpardonable crime. She had trusted him. She had been *sure* that he would help her. Her quick, sweet confidence in him is not to be falsely translated, or abused.

"Oh! you have done it!" cries she joyously. "Oh, you *are* good! And now go to the drawing-room, and make an excuse for me."

The string round her waist she rapidly unties. The "bib" now is in her hand. She flings it to him.

"Catch that! throw it anywhere!" cries she, and swift as an arrow from its bow, she flies from him, and disappears in the direction of the house, leaving him possessor of one huge cross-barred apron, and thoughts too confusedly happy to be altogether satisfactory.

He arrives at the drawing-room door almost as she does, and consequently they enter the room together.

"Oh, here you are!" cries Mr. Blount cheerfully. "Thought you had succeeded in losing yourself; and Crawford *too*. Looks as if you had been losing yourselves together. Ha! ha!"

This untimely mirth is by no means checked by the fact that none except himself seems to see where the joke comes in. Evelyn shakes hands with him, presses her now rather hot cheek against Marian's cool one, and nods in a rather constrained way to Stamer, who comes over, and with a sort of determination shakes hands with her.

"What a day!" says Miss Vandeleur, who is always delicately alive to any little strain in the conditions of those around her. "Too warm to make one happy. You have been out, Evelyn?"

"Only to feed the chickens. Mr. Crawford came just as I was begining to satisfy them, and—he——." She grows visibly nervous beneath the direct glare of a very angry pair of young eyes, that she rather *feels* than sees, and breaks down ignominiously.

"He helped you? A difficult task. I know what hens and chickens are, myself," says Miss Vandeleur, with a delightfully non-comprehensible smile at Crawford—who alas!—has given the child's momentary nervousness an entirely wrong reading. "They are *the* shamelessly selfish atoms of the universe. But what a pleasant time we have had at the Castle. So far as Fenton-by-Sea goes, we must regard the fact that the duchess has left us as a national loss."

"She is wonderfully unspoiled," says Mr. Crawford, making his trite remark absently. Of what sort of use at all is a duchess, if compared with a young and beautiful love?

"I should think society will fall to pieces," says Mr. Blount, with a sniff.

"Well, you may sneer," says Evelyn, warming to the subject, "but we do feel a little out of it now, don't we?" glancing round for an encouragement that is so largely supplied by Mr. Crawford that her eyes rest on him.

"One must regret the duchess," says he, answering her glance. "But why should we come to a standstill? Can I be of any use?"

Mrs. D'Arcy bursts out laughing. Poor soul, she has not had much chance for laughter of late.

"Oh! rash man," says she. "Is there no one to give you warning? *Will* you commit yourself, then?"

"Miss D'Arcy shall command me," says he laughing. "What shall it be, then?" turning to Evelyn. "A dance, a garden party—a picnic—a——"

"You have said it," cries Evelyn gaily, who has forgotten in the new excitement all about her late discomfiture. "A picnic; we have not had one this year yet. It would be delightful, wouldn't it, Marian?"

"It would indeed," says Marian, whose eyes too have caught a brighter light.

"Then it only remains to say what day," says Crawford, who, unconsciously, has addressed himself to Evelyn solely.

"This is the seventh," says she, musing.

"Odd numbers are lucky," says Mr. Blount, striking in now with his usual luck. "Why not say the fifteenth?"

"*Oh, no!*" says Evelyn rising to her feet, and looking towards Mrs. D'Arcy in a nervous fashion that suggests a desire for help.

"No, no, dear. No, of course not," says Mrs. D'Arcy at once, speaking soothingly but with some agitation. Evelyn, still standing and pale as death, shudders a little, and walking across the room sinks down on the sofa on which her aunt is sitting and gives her hand into her keeping.

Stamer, who has been silent since Evelyn's entrance, now regarding her with some surprise, is impelled by some secret influence to move his glance from her to Crawford.

As he looks he is conscious of a severe shock. Crawford is still sitting, but his face——. It is absolutely ghastly. The eyes, bent rigidly upon Miss D'Arcy, seem starting from their sockets; the grey pallor of his skin is terrible. Good heavens! What can it mean? Whatever may be the secret of Miss D'Arcy's life, is it possible that he, Crawford, an utter stranger, can be cognizant of it, when others, old friends, lie still in the dark? The idea is so hateful to Stamer that with both hands, as it were, he pushes it from him.

"No, no, not the fifteenth," says Crawford, recovering himself by a powerful effort. "Miss—Miss D'Arcy does not desire that day and——"

He stops abruptly, as though the strength to proceed is beyond him. Stamer, watching him, grows momentarily more sure that whatever it is that the D'Arcys have hitherto concealed about Evelyn's early life is known at least to Crawford. A very rage of anger fills his breast as he admits this thought. He—he! That he should be trusted whilst those who have known and grown with her should be deemed unworthy of trust! It is intolerable.

"Then some day later," Marian is saying in her soft voice, eager as usual to fill up the gaps. "The seventeenth? That, too," to the unfortunate Batty, who is much depressed by the result of his suggestion, "would be a lucky number."

"Yes; the seventeenth by all means," says Crawford. He looks, with difficulty as it seems to Stamer—who is watching him—at Miss D'Arcy. "Will the seventeenth suit you, Miss D'Arcy?"

"Yes, yes. I hope it will be a fine day," says she faintly.

"Bound to be," says Mr. Blount, who, after all, has his uses. "You know what the Meteorological Society have said, that there will be no more rain until the middle of August. They're the biggest liars in the world, no doubt," says Mr. Blount pleasantly, "but sometimes they hit it off. Let's hope they'll do it this time."

"I feel as if rain wasn't within a million miles of me," says Marian laughing. She is feeling honestly concerned for Evelyn, but is exerting herself to pass off the afternoon's *fiasco* as best she can. Has the colonel's debt had anything to do with the fifteenth? Has the sword of Damocles descended? But if so, should not the wife rather than the niece show such signs of agitation? It is very puzzling altogether.

"You going, Crawford?" cries Mr. Blount; "then I'll go with you. Our paths lie very much the same way. And, if you're like me, you think your own company worst of all. Ha! ha!"

"You are very good," says Mr. Crawford, with an inward resignation that he forbids to rise to the surface.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NOT a drop of rain last night. Not a cloud in the sky to-day. The grass so hot as to almost hurt the feet that tread it; innumerable battalions of midges hiding under the leaves ready to spring out and attack the passer-by on any and every occasion. Clearly the day of all days for a picnic!

Evelyn, springing out of her little white bed and flinging up the window, gives way to a joyful exclamation. It is all right! Not a fear that rain will fall. What *luck*! When she has thrust her head right round the roses that are always trying to clamber in at her bedroom window and has seen that the sky is clear as clear can be, and that the sun is reigning triumphantly over all the heavens, she draws back again with a sigh of content, and looks casually round her. A pretty skirt, a mere paltry cotton, but as becoming as an Indian silk can be, catching her eye, spoils the smile on her lips and sends her thoughts off on a more mournful tack.

Last night, just as that frock had come home from the wash, the colonel had been in the lowest of all low spirits. *Something* (there is always a dispiriting vagueness about the colonel's difficulties) had occurred, had *come in* by the late post. It was a bulky letter and had driven the colonel into a considerable use of profane language. It had even led to his carrying off his wife into the privacy of their chamber, from whence she had emerged later on with her eyes very much the worse for wear. Her temper, unlike the colonel's,

had remained unruffled, but she was so sad that the children—who as a rule spent their time climbing all over her—finding her a dismal companion for the nonce, like the ungrateful little demons they can be, forsook her in a body.

This, however, was more a relief to her than a grievance. She knew they would come back to her to-morrow—that *no* one, in their eyes, was as good as their mammy; and when they had fled to the nursery, or the kitchen, or the coal cellar, as the case might be, she found a certain sense of comfort in opening her mind to Evelyn, and Jimmy, who was now too big to honestly believe that a whole tribe of banditti could be at any moment discovered in the out-houses or the garrets.

It was the same old story. Pressure brought to bear on the poor colonel for debts that were none of his own. Ruin must soon catch him up, it was now racing so closely at his heels. Neither she nor the colonel, of course, would go to this picnic to-morrow. There would be no good in going. Where would the enjoyment come in with such a weight upon one's heart? but Jimmy and Evelyn——

No, Evelyn would not go. The girl's heart sank a little, but she was quite determined that nothing under heaven should induce her to go to Mr. Crawford's picnic, until the colonel, grave-eyed and pale, coming in and learning the discussion in hand, grew so furious, that to appease him and please him, she went back on all her resolutions, and promised that she and Jimmy would not only go, but be sure to enjoy themselves tremendously.

"To think of your *not* going," said the colonel; "why he's giving it for you. It would be 'Hamlet' with Ophelia left out."

He spoke kindly, unselfishly as usual, without any *arrière pensée*. He would be as incapable of "making a match," as they term it, as he was of managing successfully his own affairs.

The spot agreed upon was a little romantic hollow, called "The Oak Bowl," by the country people round, because of its being surrounded on three sides by these sovereigns of the forest. It lies in the centre of a huge wood, with hills rising skyward on its left all clothed with towering oaks; on its right, a delicate slope overgrown with bracken and ferns of all kinds; a slope that a little further on grows into a rather dangerous bit of precipice, on which the rarest ferns, the

most desirable mosses, are growing in luxuriance, as if happy in the thought that the reckless plucker of all things as he goes by, will at least have a difficult task before him ere he can drag *them* from their native soil. The proposed spot for the picnic might indeed be termed a plateau with a verdured wall at its back and a sheer incline at its feet; a very home of greenery, delicately mingled with the eternal blue above. A lovely spot, designed for lovers and their lasses, and for nothing more prosaic.

Mrs. Vaudrey, however, is the first to put in an appearance on this sacred plain. Mrs. Vaudrey, to do her justice, is *never* late. Be it to greet friend or foe, to spend a pleasant day, or sustain the fatigues of battle, she is always up to time. Surely as excellent a thing in woman and as rare as that low sweet voice of which we are so deadly tired of—not hearing.

She has several of her young brood round her, Mr. Crawford having made it a special point that they should be present, after a surreptitious meeting with two of them, who had waylaid him on his walk home one evening, and with the scandalous outspokenness of children had begged from him an invitation. Perhaps however the little Vaudreys would not have gone so far, had they not been sure beforehand of their man, and the certainty that their wish would be granted.

"Dear me, you are late, you're very late," cries Mrs. Vaudrey, in the precise tone the hostess might have used, had there been one, as at last Mr. Crawford and a large party emerge from the winding pathway and advance towards her.

"The vicar not come?" says Mr. Crawford, when he has greeted her. There is distinct disappointment in his tone.

"No. No indeed. Just like Reginald, you know. Old Mary Morning had a slight cramp and sent to him to say she was dying and should get Holy Communion; so of course he went. She has had this cramp regularly every week since last Christmas, yet Reginald always believes she is going to die each time. How d'ye do, my dear girl?" to Evelyn. "How d'ye do, Marian? Such a blessing having a fine day, isn't it?" She says this as though fine days have been denied them of late, whereas there hasn't been a drop of rain for a fortnight.

"Isn't it?" says Mr. Blount with enthusiasm. "We've

had so few of 'em. I anticipated nothing but a downpour myself, yesterday was so unpromising."

"Yesterday was the finest day we have had this year," says Evelyn indignantly, who is always angry when any one makes fun of Mrs. Vaudrey, perhaps more for Mr. Vaudrey's sake than for her own.

"D'ye say so!" exclaims Mr. Blount, with an air of the most exaggerated astonishment, whereon Evelyn, seeing there is nothing to be got out of him, very prudently turns her back on him, to find herself face to face with Mrs. Wylding-Weekes.

If this volatile person could be supposed capable of entertaining a lasting feeling for any one, be it love or hate, it is certainly for Evelyn; and it isn't hate.

"Oh! there you are," says she, slipping her arm confidentially through Evelyn's and leading her a little away from the others. "I've been dying to know who has been asked to this affair. *You* know," with emphasis and a sly push. "You're in this swim. I guess you're the boss of this show!" It is Mrs. Wylding-Weekes latest irregularity that she *will* think it funny to talk American.

"I don't know much more than you do," says Evelyn calmly. "Except that perhaps I know Mr. Crawford better, and——"

"That'll do, you needn't give yourself away too much," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. "Well, go on; who's coming?"

"Lady Stamer, the Osmonds, the Coventrys, Marian Vandeleur——"

"Oh, get out!" says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. "Do you suppose I want to know what *women* are coming? That lot may always go overboard for me. Give us the men."

"The men from Uxton, then;" (meaning the officers from the barracks there).

"No, you don't mean it?" says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, brightening up instantly, and giving a little pull to her hat. "*That's* something, anyway. Go on. You're better than a book."

"The men from Dashley Barracks on the other side of Fenton-by-Sea."

"Good heavens! why didn't I put on my other frock," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes in open despair. "Really, Evelyn, considering you knew, I think you might have given me a friendly hint."

"But I thought you knew," says Evelyn. "And besides,—I don't know the other frock, but you look as pretty as anything in this one."

"Do I, seriously? Well, of course we all know one compliment from a woman is worth twenty from a man. So here goes—I'll enjoy myself whilst I may. But I do assure you, Evelyn, my new gown is a perfect *angel* of a thing. I was keeping it for some big affair, but after all this promises to be the biggest thing of the season, and that's why—But never mind my frock, go on with the roll-call; any more men?"

"The people round; Batty Blount, Sir Bertram and Eaton Stamer."

"Oh! lother *him*," interrupting rather brusquely, and with the secret intention of doing her companion a good turn, a desire that has lingered in her frivolous mind ever since she happened to hear a little bit of gossip in which Eaton's name had been prominent. "I don't think much of him," says she, not looking at her companion this time, with quite a wonderful amount of delicacy for *her*. "A man who can marry for money! I hate that sort. And I hear the old lady has as good as completed an engagement between him and Marian Vandeleur. Did you hear of it?"

"A word or two," says Evelyn, in a calm steady tone that so astonishes her companion, that she forgets her new manners, and relapsing into the old ones, turns and stares at her.

"Well, a very good match too," says she decisively. "Both are as dull as ditchwater. Pity to spoil two houses with them, say I."

"I do not think them dull," says Evelyn, turning away gladly to greet some newcomers. For the first time it occurs to her that Mrs. Wylding-Weekes is insufferably vulgar. This is rather hard on the latter, who, for perhaps the first time in her life, has tried to do a good action. She had sought to warn the girl, without any ulterior design—anything that could benefit herself.

"Do you think it is time for dinner?" says Crawford, coming up to Evelyn, and addressing her pointedly. "It is two o'clock. Nobody has lunched, so of course everybody is hungry."

"At that rate—yes," says she, colouring a little, but

smiling. "Have you asked everybody else? Lady Stamer would know the orthodox hour for a picnic dinner."

"I have asked no one but you," says he, in his slow heavy way. "This hour will suit you then?" He turns away, as if no other word is necessary, and gives some orders to his servants.

A faint, a very faint smile, passes as a wave over the faces of those who have heard Crawford's words, but no one makes any comment thereon, except Stamer, who happens to have just come up to Evelyn almost as Crawford spoke.

"You are singularly favoured," says he, with a smile that is not devoid of bitterness. If he had expected an angry rejoinder, he is instantly assured of his mistake. Miss D'Arcy lets her soft eyes rest upon him meditatively. There is no annoyance in their velvet depths, no indignation. If there is a little sad reproach, that is all. He had expected anger, and he has found only a gentle surprise. It may be that some of Miss D'Arcy's charm arises from the fact that she is not always to be accounted for, that she has an "infinite variety" that leaves her always fresh.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE dinner is a perfect success. Not a grain of salt has fallen into the pies, not a scrap of sugar into the lobster salads. The champagne cup is devoid of flies. All is peace!

Outwardly at least; within, it appears that fires still burn. It is plain to a good many that Lady Stamer and Mrs. Vaudrey are not on speaking terms to-day; that they are "out" with each other, as the school-children have it, but to know the reason why is reserved for the very few—for Evelyn and Marian alone.

Dinner—or lunch—at an end, the two last-named have wandered away a little from the others, in a sort of idlesse; Marian had had something in her mind to say when she drew near to Evelyn, a vague anxiety to put into words a certain rumour that had reached and had disquieted her for her friend, but the sudden descent of Mrs. Vaudrey upon the two girls had chained them both to silence.

"All alone?" says she, linking her arm in Evelyn's. "It is a comfort to see two girls at least who do not bow the knee to *Man*!" This with a huge capital! "Oh, my dear Evelyn, what have I not suffered through that demon woman to-day! Such insolence! Barely knew me, if you please. *Me*! who knew her in her poverty!"

"You mean Lady Stamer?"

"Whom else should I mean? Who but she could be a perfect *Turk* on occasion!"

"Never mind her," says Marian kindly. "Come on with us. Up this way, Mrs. Vaudrey. There is a lovely view a little bit farther on, that will drive all angry thoughts out of your mind. This way, through the wire fence—and in the field below we shall be able to look over the precipice and see the river."

"Through that wire fence?" says Mrs. Vaudrey, pointing to a long straight line of fencing, the wires of which are uncomfortably close together.

"Yes, I'll go first," says Evelyn. "You follow. Marian and I will hold up the wires, so that you can easily slip through."

She slips through herself as easily as possible, her pretty lithe figure passing under the wire without a struggle; but alas! for poor Mrs. Vaudrey when she attempts to follow her.

One foot of generous size, with accompaniments to match, gets through all right, and half the solid body follows, but after that comes a fatal hitch! There is a violent struggle, a gallant attempt at extrication, a subdued groan or two, several wriggles, and then the truth lies bare. Mrs. Vaudrey has stuck fast!

Her head, and both her arms, and one foot on *that* side, all the rest of her on *this*. It is a terrible moment. The girls nearly go down before it. Exert themselves as they will—and as they *do*—it is borne home upon them at last that no power on earth that they can invoke will land her safely on the other side.

"It is my fault," says Evelyn, who is almost on the point of tears.

"It is her bustle," says Marian, with miserable conviction. "Try again; it is like a flint! No, we'll *never* do it. Good heavens! what a predicament! Mrs. Vaudrey, try to keep your head up—try to keep——"

"I'm trying! I'm *dying*!" gasps Mrs. Vaudrey, unconsciously dropping into poetry, like Silas Wegg.

"Oh dear Mrs. Vaudrey, try to hold up for another moment or two, help *must* come soon. Oh, what on earth is it made of?" says Evelyn, in an agonized tone, bearing down upon the article of dress in question as she speaks.

What indeed!

"It won't bend. It won't do anything! Oh, Marian, what shall we do?"

"Hold up her head," says Marian; "it will be apoplexy if you don't. Oh, will nobody *ever* come?"

"If Marian were to push," gasped Mrs. Vaudrey, "and you to pull, I might perhaps slip through. For heaven's sake, girls, do something. If Bessie Stamer were to come up now, I should never get over it."

"I *am* pushing," says Marian desperately.

"And I'm pulling," says Evelyn, with a dry sob; "but *nothing* comes of it. It—it's your *bustle* that won't give way! Oh! where did you buy it?"

"I didn't buy it—*made it*," moans Mrs. Vaudrey. "Fresh one this morning. Hay!"

"Oh! I do think you needn't have stuffed it *quite* so hard," says Evelyn, who is now in tears.

An exclamation from Marian startles her.

"Here's some one!" cries she.

Mrs. Vaudrey makes a dying wriggle. "*Not Bessie?*" shrieks she.

"No, no; only Batty, Eaton and Sir Bertram. Evelyn," in an agony, "how are we to hide her?"

"*Hide me!*" cries Mrs. Vaudrey wildly. "For what? For why?" She seems to be going back to her childhood in the extremity of her agitation, so peculiar is her speech. "They're *men*," ungratefully; "*they'll* be able to do something. *You* can't! Call them. Shout to them! If they can do nothing, you had better send for Reginald. He'll be good for the burial service, at all events."

It is plain that there is no false shame about her. Miss Vandeleur, stepping to one side, lets the scene sink in upon the minds of the approaching relief party. Words fail her, but she makes a tragic gesture that is as expressive as a volume.

The three men rush to the rescue. There is a great straining of muscles, a refusal to meet each other's eyes, a

final effort, and the affectionate wire that has so long embraced her, smashing in two, Mrs. Vaudrey drops, an inert but grateful bundle, on to the nice soft grass beyond.

"Dear me, dear me," says she, sitting up and at once beginning to adjust her bonnet, "*such* a thing to happen to me!"

She isn't even embarrassed. The girls look at her with amazement, the men with admiration, tempered with—well, it doesn't matter; they have at least the decency to control it—all, that is, except Mr. Blount, who has apparently been taken with the palsy.

"How am I looking, girls?" asks Mrs. Vaudrey from her lowly position on the bosom of mother earth. "Tumbled, eh? How's my hair? Is my bonnet straight? D'ye think if I met Bessie she wouldn't suspect anything?"

"Nothing," says Evelyn, who has been putting Mrs. Vaudrey's head to rights, and generally rubbing her down. "Better get up, however, she might turn that corner at any moment."

"Allow me," says Sir Bertram, giving the prostrate lady his hand. He brings her by a superhuman effort to her feet. Alone he does it. Eaton is picking up the few stray articles that she has shed during her struggle, and Mr. Blount is still battling with his disease.

He is evidently very bad. He has retired into the back-ground, and is apparently incapable of action of any sort. All the black looks united, that Marian and Sir Bertram have showered upon him, have not had the effect of checking the attack that has seized him. On the contrary, he seems to grow worse every moment. To a casual observer it might suggest itself that the unfortunate young man is bursting.

"*Really*, Batty," says Evelyn at last, in a disgusted tone. It is the match to the fuse. Mr. Blount gives way to his feelings; a guffaw breaks from him that shakes the circumambient air.

After *this*, the deluge being imminent, all seek to hide their heads; unnecessarily, as time proves. A second cackle joins itself to Mr. Blount's. To the amazement of all the quakers present, it proves to come from Mrs. Vaudrey.

"Oh, you may laugh," says she to Batty, thus countenancing that youth's ill-timed hilarity, and thereby in all probability saving him from a most painful death; he is

far gone towards apoplexy at this moment. "But if you had been *me*, you'd have sung a different tune; especially if you had thought that Bessie Stamer might be down upon you at any second, eye-glass in eye. You would have felt laughter far from you then, I promise you, and you'd have quailed as I did. There, don't be angry with him, girls. I daresay any one who wasn't a principal ingredient in the mess, could hardly help getting a laugh out of it."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TOGETHER they all go on their way. The late tragic element is so largely commingled with the present comic, that scarcely a suspicion of the former remains. They are all indeed in the gayest spirits. Sir Bertram has dropped into step with Miss Vandeleur; his brother had made an attempt to appropriate Evelyn in the same way, but she had clung to Mrs. Vaudrey in a figurative way, and had encouraged Mr. Blount in so barefaced a fashion, that he is quite justified in tucking her arm into his, as he does without any of the ordinary formularies. She seems quite delighted with him indeed, and only when he proposes as a part of the day's amusement to climb a steep hill that apparently leads nowhere, does she put in a demurrer.

"But, my dear Batty, it's as bad as the Eiffel Tower. It seems to go on for ever, like the brook. No; I won't go up there. You'd hate it; wouldn't you, Mrs. Vaudrey?" appealing eagerly to that friendly lady.

"I shouldn't love it," says she, "unless there is a company at the foot of it with whom to insure one's life. No one's breath is warranted to last for ever, and the top of that hill is a good way off."

"I'll give you a leg—er—a hand, I mean," says Mr. Blount, who is always full of possibilities.

"Nonsense, Batty. It would take us the whole day, and I want Mrs. Vaudrey to see the river from a certain point. It is so lovely. Besides, that hill; what use is it? Where does it lead to?"

"Heaven!" replies Mr. Blount solemnly. "Do you mean to tell me, after all Mr. Vaudrey's teaching, that you object to going there?"

"Just yet? *Certainly!*" responds Miss D'Arcy promptly.

"Well, go your own way," says Mr. Blount with sad resignation.

It is a very idyllic way, and leads them presently to that part of the plateau that overlooks the steepest part of the precipice, and lets the lover of nature gaze with satisfied eyes upon the brawling stream that far below rushes like an angry living thing over its dark rocks and through its gleaming lilies.

Meantime Mr. Crawford had made his way to the top of that high hill, that seemed so good to Batty Blount. The dinner at an end, his duty too had looked to him as finished, and seeing Evelyn strolling away with Mrs. Vaudrey and Marian Vandeleur, he had told himself that a season of rest was due to him.

In truth he had been made glad by that vision of her departing, happy, bright, beautiful, as she always was, with only two women as her companions. By some singular chance, the men who usually affected her had been delayed—kept back—but she had not seemed to miss them. With a thrill of intense content he recollects how entirely without regret had been the lovely face that had gone up that flower-filled path beside Mrs. Vaudrey.

For himself, he had stolen away. Many devices had been laid for him, but he had been clever enough to elude them, and now flinging himself upon the turf right up on the top of the oak-crowned hill he gives himself up to the torture that has drawn him to itself all day and compelled his obedience.

Oh, God! How long! How long! How long! He does not drop his face into his hands, but rather, stares heavenward, as though imploring assistance from on high. His sin—his crime. For ever it seems to call aloud for vengeance. Is no remorse, no grovelling at its feet, no wildest passion of prayer, of any avail?

This month of all the others! How had he dared to suggest a festivity in *this* month! And yet—could time, could space itself annihilate that awful past? was not one month, one day, as unconquerable as another? Was there one day in all these past ten terrible years, when sweet forgetfulness gave peace and rest? Not one!

The idea of unfairness grows on him as he leans forward, elbows on knees, his unquiet eyes on the level plateau

down below, and far—far below that again, the shining river rushing along towards its ocean home. Other men had sinned, had suffered; sinned deliberately, and of malice prepense, whilst he——They had thus sinned, and after a bit—a year or two—a month or two—a *day*, had gained that modern Nirvana—indifference! The merciful waves of time had gone over them, sweeping them hither and thither, and if they had failed to wash them altogether clean, had at least landed them safe and dry on a friendly coast, with most of the old cruel stinging regret rubbed off them, through contact with the rocks, and shoals, and storms through which they had carried them.

But for him, no such halcyon aftermath had ever been. No rest had come to him. The waters of Lethe had passed him by; with all his agonizing desire he had failed to reach, to bathe in them. He *could* not forget! Remorse, that hideous worm, had found a home within his breast, and there burrowed, feeding on him day by day.

Just now the valley below him seems swept clean; a fragrance of summer flowers rises from it. Oh! That he were thus pure! If but the past might be purged—wiped out—forgotten.

“Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean.”

The words fall from his parched lips almost unconsciously; as he utters them his head falls forward as if eager to find a rest within his palms.

It is a strange moment. The lowering action of the head brings him within full view of a party who have just emerged upon the broad plateau down below.

Mrs. Vaudrey, Marian Vandeleur, two or three men, and Evelyn.

He rises abruptly. He will fling off these hateful memories; he will find fresh life and newer times in *her* company.

Always with his eyes on the *svelte* figure that is his whole world, he presses through bracken and tangled furze until at last he is almost on a level with her.

At this point he raises his eyes. Evelyn has moved forward to the very edge of the precipice; she is evidently pointing to some rare fern far down *below* that has attracted her artistic tendencies; in her excitement she makes a step forward. There is a moment that nobody can classify afterwards; and *then!* Mr. Crawford knows that she *has*

fallen over, and that all life seems to have condensed itself into the one desire—to bring her back to life!

CHAPTER XXIX.

It has all happened with such terrible suddenness; Captain Stamer had not been exactly next to her, yet it seems to him afterwards that he had never once taken his eyes away from her, and yet—There is a little cry upon the air, Mrs. Vaudrey has rushed forward. Eaton, with a stifled exclamation, has run towards the fatal spot where the little buoyant figure had last been seen and disappeared, but a shadow brushing past him, so close as almost to touch him as it went by, has checked his onward rush.

In the second that intervenes between the shock of the check and the knowledge that he has been forestalled, it grows upon him that Crawford's had been the shadow. There is indeed no possibility of doubt. All now are leaning over the verge of the precipice, and there, far down now, is Crawford's lean form clinging to shrub and bush as he goes, and always with his eyes fixed upon the half-fainting figure of the girl, caught providentially in the embrace of a hardy elm half-way down.

There is perhaps not so much danger about the whole affair as may suggest itself. But there is this much at least, that if Evelyn had not been caught by that great elm, she might, nay *must* have rolled into the river down below, and would unmistakably have been killed either by the rocks or by the driving flood.

As it is she has fallen into a little cradle. Crawford, winding his arm round her, drags her out from the kind branches that have so far succoured her, and commences his return.

Thus laden, his ascent is difficult. Evelyn has fortunately fainted, but even with her light inanimate form thus pliable within his grasp the return to *terra firma* is a matter not only of skill but of great anxiety and danger. He is equal to it, however. With the water pouring off his brow he creeps slowly, hand over hand up the face of the rock, and presently, assisted at the last by enthusiastic friends above, gives Evelyn into Mrs. Vaudrey's eager arms.

Her unconsciousness is short-lived. She awakens presently to find Marian and Mrs. Vaudrey bending over her, to find too that her right foot is so painful that she cannot put it to the ground. Not sprained, says Dr. Bland, who is on the spot, but likely to be tedious.

Mr. Crawford has a carriage brought to the nearest spot, and with Mrs. Vaudrey in attendance the poor little invalid is taken home.

"So inconsiderate!" says Lady Stamer, addressing a large audience a little later on, including Eaton and Marian. "But some people are never happy unless they are putting themselves *en évidence*. "So selfish too to spoil so charming a day," with a smile at Crawford who has just come up.

"You can hardly say she spoiled the day," says Marian gravely. "It is now so late that I expect we ought to feel the day, however charming"—with on her part a gracious glance at her host—"to be at an end."

"Still to leave an unpleasant feeling behind her. That is so unpardonable," says Lady Stamer. "You all know what I mean. One hates to look back on a day that has even a *souffçon* of unpleasantness about it; and it must be conceded that that little girl has——"

"One would think she fell over the cliff on purpose," says Stamer with an unmistakable sneer.

"I'm afraid we must not think of the day, Lady Stamer, though it is more than good of you to concern yourself about it," says Crawford courteously. "What we have to think of really, is Miss D'Arcy's foot. I fear it is badly hurt, and the shock to her system—I dread that too."

Somebody calling him at this moment, he walks away, providentially no doubt. Lady Stamer, turning to her son, clutches his arm.

"You never gave me a hint," says she. "I never even suspected it. Just fancy what a sly little creature she is. Been throwing her cap at him all this time, and so carefully that not one of us has been the wiser! Oh! these modern girls! These nineteenth century *débutantes*. No sooner on the ground are they, than they score the highest number. Well, he is enormously rich, therefore, as the world goes, enormously foolish. We can only pray for him, that he may escape that girl's bare-faced machinations."

"We'll all pray for that," says Mr. Blount. "His gain, you see, would be our loss."

"Have you ordered the carriage, Bartholomew?" demands his aunt sharply.

"Eaton did," says he cheerfully, "the moment he heard that Evelyn had gone home."

"Dear Mr. Blount, what a suggestion," says Mrs. Coventry, who has just come up, and has at once grasped the situation, and is prepared to revel therein. "Are you *all*, then, in love with Miss D'Arcy? On what small threads everything hangs. If that bush had given way a second sooner, or Mr. Crawford had been a second later, the entire male population of Fenton would have been in deep black next week."

"Even so," says Batty imperturbably.

"And you, Captain Stamer?" says she. "What is your opinion?"

"I can't answer for the entire population," says he as imperturbably, "but for myself, *yes*."

"Two," says she laughing, "and Mr. Crawford three. You think I may count on him?" appealing directly to Lady Stamer, whose eyes by this time are daggers.

"I know nothing of him," says she coldly, "except that I hear he is undeniably charitable."

"Ah. More than can be said of *all* Mr. Vaudrey's parishioners," says Mrs. Coventry ill-naturedly, with her usual uncompromising stare; Lady Stamer's charities being, as a rule, as few and far between as the currants in the orthodox school pudding.

CHAPTER XXX.

To be the subject of universal interest is one thing, to be compelled to lie all day on a sofa and see nobody is quite another. To-day, the third since her accident, Miss D'Arcy has openly rebelled, and has insisted not only on being brought downstairs by the colonel and placed on the drawing-room lounge, but on seeing whosoever may chance to call.

Everybody has been thoroughly kind. Everybody has called each day. Mrs. Wylding-Weekes has indeed outdone herself in good-nature, and leaves behind her the impression that she must have literally left bare her houses, which are

very numerous, to judge by the huge baskets of grapes and roses she has brought with her on each occasion of her calling. Not even by Mr. Crawford has she been excelled, though his grapes have been sent down in a lavish profusion. It is a real good time for the younger members of the D'Arcy household. They have understood at last what it must be like to sit under one's own vine. Grapes rain upon them. There is a small person aged five, who has been proved guilty of the blood-curdling hope, that "Evelyn will fall over the rocks every day." This young person has been threatened with a spanking if he says it again.

Being so determined to re-enter society, Evelyn, as usual, gains her point. Mrs. D'Arcy has dressed her up in a dear little white robe, with tiny frillings of lace everywhere—a present from Marian after one of her Parisian trips. The frill round the neck seems to hug the pretty white throat for very love of it, and the sleeves, made loose, fall back and show the rounded arms beneath. Her soft hair has been gathered up into a huge loose knot on the top of her head.

"Well, if somebody doesn't call, it will be a shame," says Mrs. D'Arcy, surveying her work with admiration. "I never saw you look so nice. One should always lie on a lounge, and wear a loose white frock, and be a little ill, to look one's *best*."

"Give me a looking-glass," says Miss D'Arcy promptly; roused to a pleased curiosity by these thrilling remarks.

"Don't you see?" says Mrs. D'Arcy.

"Yes—ye-es. I know what you mean. You would like to be one of the Roman girls in Alma Tadema's pictures."

"I should? *No*. But I think you might be. I dare-say he would paint you if he could see you now."

"I daresay," says Miss D'Arcy with much contempt. "Well, I hope I'm more important than one of those Roman girls, anyway. They never do anything but sit in a marble bath and eat fruit all day so far as I can find out."

"It's true," says Mrs. D'Arcy thoughtfully. "Whilst you——"

"Can fall over a cliff at any moment. That's what you ought to say, isn't it?" says Evelyn with a little laugh.

"I must go and see about the jam," says Mrs. D'Arcy suddenly. "If any one calls, I'll tell Mary to show them in here; though I do hope, Evelyn, it won't be too much

for you. However, so far as my opinion goes, I don't think cheerful society ever did anybody harm. But the colonel——"

"Yes?" says Evelyn eagerly, raising herself on her arm. "The colonel is worse than ever to-day, isn't he, auntie? Nothing fresh about that horrid business is there?"

"No, dear. Nothing fresh."

"Are you sure? Why don't you look at me? I thought there was something queer about him as he carried me down. His dear arms seemed to tremble. Oh, Kitty!" (in supreme moments she calls her by her Christian name) "I do hope——"

"Now don't agitate yourself, Evelyn; you know the longer you are laid up the more unhappy we shall be. For the colonel's sake try to get well, and," with a little break in her voice, "for mine, dear. I fear—I *fear* that there are bad days before us."

"Oh; I fear it too," says the girl sadly. "Was there another letter to-day?"

"Yes. Nothing *very* bad, you know; but threatening always. I'm afraid he will have to pay that money. Well," with a sigh and a brave attempt at a smile, "perhaps we shan't either. No one can ever be sure of anything in this life. It is a providential arrangement that the bad and the good strokes are equally uncertain. Now lie quietly there, darling, and rest yourself, and I'll be back as soon as ever I can. But you know what Matilda is?" Matilda is the cook. A good many of us know what Matilda is.

She kisses her little patient and disappears by one door, almost as Crawford is ushered into Evelyn's presence through another.

"Oh! I'm so glad you've come," cries Evelyn with a quick smile that is full of honest pleasure. "I *thought* you would. And it has been so dull—so dreadfully dull, ever since I—spoiled your party!"

"Ever since my unfortunate party spoiled your foot, rather. Is it better? Really. I have brought you," taking a small phial from his pocket, "a lotion—a strange mingling of strange drugs, that I learned to make whilst in the East. I learned many things there; though the things I sought failed me. It will act like a charm. I should have brought it sooner, but I had to send to Paris for one or two of the ingredients."

"How kind of you. You were in the East, then?"

"Yes. Over best part of Asia; the most unknown parts. For ten years I lived there amongst the tribes, and learned many of their secrets."

"What a change from the life here," says she thoughtfully. "I have often longed for something like that. To get away entirely—to another state of being altogether. And you have really tasted it. I envy you."

"Oh, no, you need not," returns he with an inscrutable smile. He is silent for a moment. "This lotion is harmless, but powerful. It will deaden pain at once, and give a quick recovery to any bruise. And your foot? Does it hurt you much?"

"A little always. But I am rather ashamed of the fuss I have made over it. Still, Mr. Crawford," looking at him imploringly, "I don't think I *quite* spoiled your day, did I? It was nearly over, wasn't it, now? when I fell down that awful place," with a shudder. She pauses here, and grows a little white and nervous.

"Why will you return to it?" says he sharply. "Let it alone. You spoiled no day; but if you had spoiled a thousand, do you think they would count against a single painful throb of yours? No; believe me!"

"And they were all just going home, weren't they? They didn't lose *very* much? I have been rather fretty about it," says she nervously; "because one hates to feel oneself a nuisance, you know, and Lady Stamer——"

"Oh!" says he, rising abruptly to his feet. An unpleasant adjective coupled with Lady Stamer's name falls in a dulled fashion on the air. Evelyn decides to take no notice of it. He takes a turn or two up and down the room, and then stands still beside her, looking down on her lovely pallid face. "You are better? Tell me that. Anything else is of no consequence," says he abruptly.

"On the road to being quite well," says she. She pauses; tears grow in her eyes. She looks at him and finally holds out her hand and slips it into his. "Well, *now*," says she, "but only for you—if you had not been there; how would it be with me at this moment? I should be dead—they would be burying me."

"Oh, no!" cries he, so fiercely that the pain of the thought becomes apparent.

"But yes, indeed. I have thought it all over and I am

sure of it. That horrible depth below me"—with another swift shiver—"I seem to see it always. I should have gone down—down—and—I am glad I fainted," says she with a little gesture that betrays the horror of that past moment. "I lost something of the fear then; but what I did *not* lose is, the memory of your coming to me. Oh, the relief of it!" She recovers herself a little and smiles faintly. "I owe you my life," says she; "you saved it."

She is hardly prepared for the change that passes over his face as she says this. He rises abruptly and with hurried steps strides up and down the room. He seems almost to have forgotten her. A dark flush dyes his cheek and brow.

"To save a life! If that might be! A life for a life! Expiation! Value—value received——" He mutters to himself hurriedly; that anxious rapt inward look she had noticed on his face before, is here now, strongly accentuated. But even as she dwells on it—it fades.

"No, no. You exaggerate the matter. I saved no life," says he with something of despair in his quiet tone, as he drops once more into the chair beside her. "I," with a faint smile, "could not be so fortunate. I was happy enough to be the one to lift you from your unpleasant position, but believe me you were quite safe in that bush, and if I had not come to your rescue a hundred others would have done so."

"There were not a hundred there."

"What of that? One would have sufficed to bring you to safe quarters, and surely there was one"—he looks at her intently—"there was Stamer."

"Yes. But it was you who saved me. I shall never forget that." You will take no credit to yourself," says she, smiling, but with tears in her earnest eyes. "But I will give you credit in spite of yourself. I *know* what I think of you——"

She is so sweet, so kind, so lovable, and withal so pale and fragile a little creature, that, looking at her, his whole sound judgment gives way, and thoughts, beliefs, hopes—hitherto religiously suppressed—give way, and nature springs into sudden power.

Is it—*can* it be possible? May there be a touch of heaven for him on earth—for *him*, to whom no other heaven ever can be known? And shall he grasp it?

Inaction seems impossible to him. He leaves her, and standing by the window, battles wildly with a conscience grown strong through years of warfare. Shall it, or shall it not be? Finally he comes off, as he believes, full victor, whilst conscience sits in shade and laughs at him, waiting for the opportunities that are so sure to come.

"Evelyn," says he, in a dry, harsh tone, that is yet so full of love and tenderness as to be eloquence itself, "if it be possible to you, take pity on me." He has come away from the window now and is standing by her couch looking down at her, a world of longing in his gaze. "I am old—I am unlovable. I have no single thing to make me desirable in your eyes—no smallest thing to commend me to the liking of any woman. And yet—I have dared to set my heart on you! You, and you only, I love, or ever have loved. *Let me love you? Let me marry you.*"

She does not answer immediately—a minute elapses, and then :

"*Oh, no !*" says she faintly. And then again, "Don't—*don't.*" She struggles into a sitting posture, regardless of the pain it costs her, and holds out her hands to him in a little distressed fashion.

"Oh! What a pity!" says she. "I——"

"Not another word," says Crawford calmly. He presses her hands, releases them, and pushing back his chair moves away a step or two. His head has fallen a little, but he has so placed himself that he stands behind her lounge and is therefore unseen by her. Yet somehow she knows it all, every line, every throb, as women do who have any heart at all.

He feels numbed—uncertain—a little cold, physically. All through the sharp pain that is racking him he is conscious that he is asking himself idly and indifferently whether there is not a draught somewhere; through that door or through that window? No—no, of course not; it is folly. They would not let a draught play upon her.

And this—this ruined hope of his—it had been a folly too. How had he ever been mad enough to believe that she would consent to spend her life with him? With *him*! Even as he stands here, grey-headed, old enough to be her father, the madness of it is apparent enough. And if she knew *all*. If all was laid bare before her, and she could see the brand of Cain lying (to him) so largely writ upon his

brow that he marvels how any soul who runs can help but read it—how then?

Children, they say, are sharp to see; and she, what is she but a child? How is it she has not seen that crimson stain?

Well, it is at an end. He makes a little strange, subdued, finite gesture with his hands. We are all mad at times. No doubt his maddest moment overcame him a while since, when he asked her to marry him. In his sound senses he could not have done it. It is over—it is over. He is back in his normal state, where only the secret remorse that haunts him night and day has any right to be. For him there must be no joy, no sweetness, no light. He but courted an additional turn of the torture screw when he dreamt of it.

He is vaguely aware of a sense of cruel satisfaction in the thought that now he is suffering even more keenly than usual. A fresh element of misery has fallen into his lot. No alleviation of his ever present melancholy is to be possible to him. He has sinned. It is but just that he shall suffer now. Perhaps, at the last there may be pardon—expiation.

A heavy sigh bursts from him. A sense of passionate revolt shakes his very soul. Oh, for one touch of present bliss, and let the future destroy him as it will!

With a violent start he comes back to the fact that Evelyn has risen on her elbow and has turned her face to his. With both her own small hands she takes one of his, and presses it imploringly.

"Mr. Crawford," says she, "don't be angry with me. I couldn't help it."

"Angry!" cries he with a burst of vehemence. "Not angry. Brokenhearted, if you will, but not angry."

"Oh, but that is worse!" exclaims she miserably. "Oh, do not be that either." She struggles with herself ineffectually, and in the end bursts into tears. "It is my fault," sobs she bitterly, covering her face with her hands. "But indeed I did not mean it."

"My darling! My poor child," says Crawford. "All this is too much for you. I am selfish—thoughtless. I entreat you, Evelyn, to be calm, to remember how weak you still must be. As for me—what am I? Why should you trouble yourself in this way about me? Yet your tears—such blessed tears of sympathy—should surely help to wash away—. There, there, now, be sensible, my dear. I have unnerved

you. It was only a dream, Evelyn—a foolish dream of mine—an old man's dream. Forget it! Let us be the friends we have been up to this."

"Oh, that we might be!" says she sorrowfully. She knows instinctively that the old pleasant relations between them can never be quite the same again.

"Let nothing come between us," says he earnestly. Yet there is a reflection of her own thought in his face as he bends over her, and presses a farewell kiss upon her cold little hand.

CHAPTER XXXI.

OUTSIDE he comes face to face with Captain Stamer. The two men exchange the barest greetings, but even in the short time it takes to make the most barren of salutations Stamer has been able to read the signs of agitation that lie round Crawford's mouth and shine in his melancholy eyes. They ought to have produced sympathy, but the younger man is only sensible of an increased resentment, mingled with a sense of contemptuous anger, that takes him into Miss D'Arcy's presence in a far from amicable mood.

The sight of Evelyn's tear-stained eyes, and cheeks whiter than snow, has not the effect of softening these feelings.

"What has happened?" exclaims he, putting strong pressure on himself, and trying to speak sympathetically. "Something has distressed you?" He looks down at her in a terribly interrogative fashion. He is unaware of the distinct disapproval that is in his whole air. Of this he is unconscious; the one thing of which he *is* conscious at this instant is, that it is unbearable to him that Crawford should have had it in his power to make her cry.

"Nothing—nothing at all," says she, colouring hotly. She feels the disapproval and resents it. The one had thought only of her pain, the other in his selfishness is thinking only of himself. She forgets the fact that his selfishness rises out of his love for her, and that to all women such selfishness is sweet. "Call it pain, anything you will. After all," with a very poor attempt at a smile, "I have not so much pluck as you thought I had, have I? A sprained ankle, that isn't even properly sprained, should not do *one* up so entirely, should it?"

"No," says he. Her pathetic little questions have not reduced him to a proper frame of mind. He is not struck to contrition by her pale face. She compares him with her last visitor, and the comparison seems to reduce Stamer to a terribly low level. As for him, he is thinking only that she is concealing something from him; something about Crawford! Great heaven! A man old enough to be her grandfather! This is a palpable exaggeration. But a man in a temper should always be allowed a wide margin.

"You see it isn't a sprain, exactly," says Evelyn, now bent on confining herself to the conventional society talk, "Dr. Bland was here this morning, and I am sure you will be glad to hear that he says it will be nothing—that I shall be quite myself again in a day or two."

"That is very good news," in a tone that would not have been out of place at the reading of a will.

"Thank you. I knew you would like to hear it. I should count myself fortunate——" she breaks off here, and a light comes into her eyes. "Oh, *more*," cries she—"I should feel thankful! If Mr. Crawford had not caught me when he did, I should——"

"*He* was fortunate," interrupts Stamer gloomily. "But there is no reason for deifying him. I—*any one* of us there—would have brought you up safe and sound if he hadn't."

"Oh, I know that. I feel it," says she graciously. "But you see—he did it."

"Yes. That will be a reproach to us for ever. I see what you mean." *His* manner at all events is ungraciousness itself.

"I don't think you do. I mean only that I cannot forget that I owe my life to Mr. Crawford."

"You do *not*," says he passionately. "There was no question of death. Were we all cowards or fools save that one man? You have known me a long time, Evelyn—was I likely to desert you at such a moment? I was on the point of dropping over, when—he forestalled me. And if I had not been there, Bertram would have gone to you, or else Batty."

"How many friends one has," says she, smiling at him with a pretty gratitude. "How can I tell you how grateful I am? But," softly, "you would not have me be *ungrateful*, would you?"

"Ungrateful?"

"To Mr. Crawford," says she in her little gentle way.

"Certainly not," with much virtue, but increased ill-temper.

"That's what I thought," sweetly. "Ingratitude, the ancients tell us, is the worst of all vices."

"Then I'm afraid you have been guilty of it." He pauses as he looks at her and there is an undeniable touch of satisfaction in his tone. "I saw Crawford as he left the house."

"Well?" A wise man would have been warned by her eyes. But when was a lover wise?

"Well? And I found you in tears."

"That might argue *him* ungrateful."

"It might. But somehow it doesn't. Time is of some small value now and then, and these last two months have not left me entirely ignorant. The coming to conclusions, too, is a matter not given over entirely to oneself."

"What does this all lead up to?" demands she shortly.

"To the fact that he proposed to you to-day—and was rejected."

The note of malignant triumph in the last assertion is abominable.

"All that is a sort of a question," says she coldly. "It is, if you will forgive me for saying it, a kind of mean way of finding out things."

"Is it? Then I will put it in blunt English. Did he propose to you to-day? and did you refuse him?"

"Ah!" says she with a slight return of the mischief that is so largely ingrained in her. "Now *that* is something like a respectable cross-examination."

"Well, will you answer?"

"It is a question," says she with a quick touch of hauteur, "that neither you nor any other man has any right to ask."

She has grown a little pale.

"That means that I have guessed rightly."

"You are very rude," says she coldly. "Mr. Crawford came here to-day merely to ask how I was, and whether my foot was very painful. It was the first time I had seen him since he rescued me from that terrible position, and I felt nervous, and I—I——"

"Oh! That will do," says he with a short laugh, rising and pushing back his chair abruptly. "Pray don't go on

with it. You do it very badly. Well," with a note of bitter satisfaction, "you have refused him anyway—that's something gained. And serve him right too! The presumption of——"

"Stop, Eaton! I should advise you not to go on with it," says she, extreme anger in her voice. "You *too* do it very badly. I beg you to remember yourself."

"Have I forgotten?" demands he, looking sternly down at her.

"Almost. *I* saved you," says she with a touch of contempt. "Mr. Crawford is my friend, as you know, and you come here to abuse him to me. Could anything be in worse taste?"

"A few things, as it seems to me," with a flash from his dark eyes. "Your sudden friendship for this adventurer, for example."

"It is absurd to talk like that," says the girl indignantly. "All the world knows who Mr. Crawford's people are."

"All the world knows too that his people seem very slow about taking any notice of him."

"Of course I don't know what he has done to you," says Miss D'Arcy, "to rouse these revengeful feelings in your breast, but to be unjust is to be foolish. Do you think if Mr. Crawford's people had really tabooed him, the reason for it would not have filtered here? If you were not so blindly prejudiced you would know that to keep secret *anything* is impossible now-a-days. I daresay the real truth is that he dislikes his people, that they are disagreeable to him, and that he likes to be alone. To me it seems quite possible that people might prove disagreeable and that one would sometimes like to be alone."

"Is that a hint?" says he with an abominable laugh.

"I never hint!" says Miss D'Arcy with justifiable scorn.

"When I want to say a thing, I say it."

"You *do*!" says he.

Now, although ~~this~~ last speech conveys a distinct agreeing with her, it somehow angers her more than anything that has gone before.

"Why do you speak to me like that, Eaton?" says she, sitting up a little, and not even feeling the pain in her foot as she does so. "Why should you come here to-day to be rude to me? If you think you can induce me to change my opinion about Mr. Crawford you do not know me. I

understand him, if you don't. He was unhappy when he came here; why, I do not know—I do not want to know—and now”—with a little quiver of emotion that softens her charming if angry face—“I am afraid he is unhappier still. But I believe him to be the kindest, the best man in the world.”

“A tremendous character to give any one on so short a notice.”

“I know him at least to be supremely charitable.”

“As I warned you just now, you know nothing whatever about him beyond his name—which I *hope* is his.”

“I know him to be charitable,” persists she, two crimson spots dyeing her cheeks in the heat of the argument.

“And that, you think, will cover a multitude of sins. Well, I daresay it will be of use to him.”

“At all events I know somebody whose sins will have to go without that clothing.”

Stamer laughs. There is not much mirth in his laugh, it must be confessed.

“You needn't be at such pains to give me your true opinion of me,” says he. “I can guess at it. But this Crawford now—this Admirable Crichton of yours—how is it that you find him so far above the common herd?”

“It is very easy to sneer,” says she. “But it is not so easy to be as good a man as Mr. Crawford. You should hear Mr. Vaudrey speak of him, and I suppose *he* is a judge of what a good man should be.”

“The last judge in the world. Mr. Vaudrey is himself so full of the divine milk of human-kindness that he can see sin in no man. All his geese are swans. Were he to tell me Crawford was a saint it would be to me an additional spur to look out for the hoofs somewhere. To Mr. Vaudrey, because Crawford lavishes his money on the old hypocrites that live on *him*, Vaudrey—his new neighbour appears possessed of all the virtues. Yet this new neighbour of ours is in all probability as great an adventurer as——”

“I will not hear you speak of him like that,” interrupts she, flushing hotly. “I will hear nothing against him.”

“Oh, if he is a sacred subject!” says he with a sneer. He pauses. There is indeed a little silence that is growing fast toward awkwardness when she breaks it.

“I am tired,” says she coldly. “It is the pain, perhaps, or perhaps it is——”

"Yes, it is my fault," says he quickly. "I know what you are thinking—that I am a brute." He has grown rather pale.

"Oh, no, you mustn't blame yourself," says she, still very coldly. "You have had nothing to do with it. *Please* do not blame yourself! But—I am tired really. I should like to be alone. If you would not mind, my——"

"Certainly not!" says he, rising. "I very much regret you did not give me a hint to go sooner." He is feeling chilled—thrown back upon himself by her unfriendly manner. "For the matter of that," says he with a conventional smile, "I am going away not only for to-day but for a good many days to come. We have been ordered to Dublin. I start to-morrow. I shall not see you again for some time."

"Oh!" says she. A little delicate flush flies to her brow, and now, receding, leaves her very white. After a moment, she looks up at him.

"Marian is leaving too?" says she.

"Yes."

"She too is going to Ireland?"

"Yes."

"That will be pleasant for both of you."

"Yes."

"Is she too going to Dublin?"

"Yes."

"Ah!" says she. After this stiff cross examination she sinks back upon her seat as though exhausted bodily and mentally.

A lengthened pause ensues. All those yeses had fallen from him mechanically; he had heard her words indeed, but his thoughts had been miles away. The thrumming of a huge bumble bee upon the window pane, enraged at its imprisonment, is the only sound that breaks the oppressive stillness of the day.

"I shan't be back till Christmas," says the young man at last, without looking up. If he had said, "I shan't be back for ten years," his voice could not have been more melancholy.

"Christmas is not very far off," says she quite calmly.

"True," says he. All his melancholy seems to be dispersed on the moment; a determined hardness takes its place. "To some of us, no doubt, it sounds as though it were even *near*. Well," coming closer to her and holding out his hand—"Good-bye."

"Good-bye," returns she, letting him take her slim little hand, but refusing to return his pressure, which indeed had been slight. That hers trembles in his, he knows, but he puts that touch of nervousness down to the weakness from which she has been suffering.

He takes up his hat, holds it irresolutely, and then looks down at her again.

"There is one thing," says he. "You have accused me of being unjust. I have done you this much justice at least. I believed from the first—I *knew*—you would not marry Crawford."

"A simple belief," says she contemptuously—*not knowing!*

At the door he pauses, and looks back again. A word, a glance, would have recalled him to her for ever, but no such word comes. Will he ever forget that slight fragile form lying so prone upon the old lounge, that pretty white face, the gleaming eyes—the *unkindly* eyes—and beyond them all, the cruel careless smile?

"Good bye!" says he again, lingering, as though unconsciously hoping for a recall that is not in one of her thoughts.

"Good-bye! *Bon voyage!*" smiles she, concealing to the last, as only a woman can, the grief and despair that is tearing her heart in two. She even waves him a little idle adieu with her hand.

Stamer, as though overcome by this last token of her indifference, goes out quickly, drawing the door after him with rather unnecessary violence.

When he is quite gone, when the last sound of his footsteps has died away upon the hall outside, Evelyn lets her head fall back upon her cushions.

"He does not love *her*," says she with a slow certainty that has yet no joy or triumph in it. "No. Not a bit. But"—she pauses here and a long low heavy sigh parts her colourless lips—"but he loves *no one else either!*"

All life's despair seems to rest in this certainty. She moves her head a little to one side, as though seeking that wall to which we all turn when the extremity of grief and sorrow has found a home with us. Her long lashes, fall upon her cheeks as if to hide her eyes, but tears rush from beneath the tired lids and chase each other in sad fashion down the pallid cheeks, betraying the secret that those eyes would hide.

Oh! If he *could* have loved her!



Meanwhile he, who not only could have loved her but does love her, is striding through the hall, and is feeling quite a vindictive pleasure in hearing the hall-door slam behind him to such a report as might be reasonably supposed sufficient to rouse the neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood not rising, however, he strides down the avenue in a complete solitude most conducive to learned thought.

Such thought, however, is far from him. His thoughts at present are distinctly commonplace, and have one young woman for their motive power. The one fell question as to whether he hates or loves her most is agitating his bosom.

How changed she is ! How unapproachable ! What has happened to her ? He *used* to think she liked him beyond most of her friends, and *now*——

A month ago she was the gayest creature alive, the veriest child of nature, taking all things as they came, and enjoying them ; but to-day she was a woman, and an unfeeling one.

She didn't care a screw about his going away. *That* was apparent ! He would be a fool indeed, a greater fool even than he *has* been, to believe anything less than that. She had cared nothing. She had been a perfect block of ice when he mentioned it to her.

Christmas to her had not seemed so far away ; it had seemed indeed as to-morrow or any other near date ! Well, why shouldn't it ? It *is* a near date. A month or two or three—what is that in the life of any man ?

And after all, by Jove, there's balm in Gilead ! She has refused that damned fellow anyway. *Confound* him ! Would nothing suit him but a girl young enough to be his grand-daughter ?

Stamer with an indignant cut of his stick takes the head off two or three unoffending dandelions, and with a heavy sigh turns into the path that will take him homewards.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE autumn has come. The short, sweet, thriftless summer has died away. So full of joys it was—so prodigal of them—and with so little fear of the desolation that was bound to follow. And as the summer hopes had died, so died those

of the colonel. When the early golden autumn had given place to the first touch of winter, dour and hard—the blow fell.

It had been hoping against hope all along, but the colonel, being Irish, had never brought himself to believe that hope might be a gay deceiver. We all of us know the fickle light-winged thing to be disgracefully full of guile at times, but the colonel was altogether too faithful a child of nature to dare to question the righteousness of any of her sons, and so gave hope a warm berth in his heart. When, therefore, the crash came and the cruel creature flew away for ever, despair ensued.

"It is no use thinking about it. It is all over," says the colonel, putting down the letter he had just been reading. He had been about to begin his breakfast, but the letter had absorbed all the appetite. He is looking pale and faint.

"What is it, dear?" says Mrs. D'Arcy, rising too, and growing very colourless. "Don't look like that, George. Nothing can be *altogether* bad so long as we are all here—all of us," with a swift glance round the table, where the children, spellbound, are gazing at their father with not entirely unpleasurable consternation on their faces. Children love a row.

"It's come!" says the colonel, pointing to the letter. "I knew it would!" He certainly never had known it, but no one has the heart to remind him of that now. "We must sell everything—every stick."

"Oh, colonel! Not the *colt*," cries Evelyn, with a burst of grief.

"*Everything*, I said," with a sternness meant to conceal a disposition to tears that is strong upon him. "Would you have me be a swindler such as *he* was? Everything goes, I tell you—house, place, furniture—all."

"Oh! the house, George—the house!" says his wife, as though the words are forced from her. The house where all her children were born, where each room is full of its own sweet and tender memories. Women, like cats, cling to the roof that covers them.

"The house too," says the colonel, with terrible determination. He looks ready to sink with fatigue. "How," cries he angrily, "do you imagine I am to get £2,000! Why I haven't 2,000 pence, and yet you goad me——"

"Yes, I was wrong," says she quickly, heroically; "I

can see at once how it is. Don't mind me, dear; it was but a momentary impulse that made me say that."

"Oh! I know what you are thinking," cries the colonel fiercely. "That I have defrauded you and the children; that I have taken the bread out of your mouths; that I——"

"You wrong me, George," says she, so clearly yet so calmly that she quiets him at once. It is the first time in all his life that he has spoken roughly to her, but with a heart bleeding for his grief she understands how it is with him and takes no heed. "Tell me what you think we had better do," says she.

"We must sell this place and go back to Ireland, to that bog of ours, and try there to keep body and soul together as best we may."

"Well, well; we should be grateful that we *have* a home somewhere," says she softly, hopefully.

"Oh! can no one help us?" cries Evelyn suddenly.

"Now, look here," says the colonel, turning passionately upon her. "Once for all, Evelyn, *mind this!* I will have no one consulted about this matter, or appealed to, or——. I will have no pity, mind you, and as assuredly will I have no help. I sink or I swim by myself." He stops short here and his eyes fall upon the pretty curly heads, all turned, as if by one consent, towards him. "Oh!" cries he in a terrible voice, "that it *was* by myself."

"George, would you cast us off—would you be rid of us?" cries his wife, with a dry heavy sob.

"No, no, no," says the poor colonel. "But I have got myself into this hobble, and it is my own affair, and—don't let it be made a matter of gossip," he casts a miserable glance at Evelyn. "I did it with my eyes open. I have ruined all of you for want of a little thought, and may God forgive me for it and you, Kitty——"

He breaks down here and turns away towards the door. He looks old, bowed, broken. His handsome head has sunk upon his breast, but before he can reach the door his wife's arms are round him, and as though unable to bear the sight of that lowered head, she has raised it with one impatient hand and compelled him to look her in her faithful eyes.

Evelyn has burst into tears. The younger children are huddled together in a frightened group, whilst Jimmy, like many self-contained and tearless boys (who, God help them,

feel the most), sits motionless, horrified, unnerved, not knowing what to do, yet longing to do something. The youngest child in the room giving way to a sad little whimper, Jimmy turns upon her with a scowl that only has the effect of turning the whimper into a roar. In fact, the youngsters are now thoroughly alarmed. Their baby faces are drawn and scared. *Father to cry!*

"Go into your own room, dear—I'll be with you in a moment," whispers Mrs. D'Arcy to her husband. She has him out of the breakfast-parlour in no time, and, still very white and cold, comes back to the table.

"Oh, Kitty, can nothing be done?" cries Evelyn, going up to her.

"Many, many things," says Mrs. D'Arcy. "But if you mean about our leaving Firgrove, I think *nothing*. But, Evelyn, what does it matter so much? You are all well, and the Lord is good, and He will help us. The thing now to be considered is your uncle."

She is going round the table as she speaks, pouring out a cup of tea, getting together toast and butter and poached eggs, and putting them all on a tray.

"He will be hungry. He must be kept up. The grief is killing him," says she, going about her work dry eyed, and thrusting from her even the child of her heart, the "baby," as he tries to cling to her. *Nothing* must interfere with the task she has assigned herself of trying to support and comfort the colonel under his trouble. Even Baby must give way to him to-day.

"Oh! Kitty, if I could only help," says Evelyn miserably.

"So you can, Evelyn. You can, indeed, darling. You know what a blessing you always have been in this house."

"But now—a burden," says the girl rather forlornly.

Mrs. D'Arcy, putting down the tray, turns upon her two reproachful eyes, brilliant with tears.

"Am I not suffering enough, then? Must you too try to break my heart?" says she.

"Oh, no, auntie! Oh, no, dearest, *dearest* Kitty!" cries the girl, flinging her arms round her. "There—there. Don't mind me. I am ungrateful! Go to him," says she, pushing Mrs. D'Arcy towards the door. "Nobody should be thought of now but him. But wait, Kitty, wait! You have forgotten the pepper, and you know how fond he is of pepper with his poached eggs."

Still sobbing softly, she places the pepper castor on the tray, and having seen Mrs. D'Arcy disappear, gives Jimmy some directions about the disposal of the children for the afternoon, and slips away into the garden.

Here she can think matters out without fear of interruption, and here she will be near to Kitty—Kitty, poor darling, who will be sure to want her presently.

It is a dull and chilly day—sad as the thoughts that she has brought with her into this silent garden, where the last remnants of the autumn flowers are lying dead or dying. The tears are still wet upon her cheeks, but though unhappiness has made its prey of her, still her spirit is uncaught, and wanders away into eager imaginings and fond fancies, and longings for the relief of the tender friend who has been not only uncle but father to her for so many years.

And all those little, dear, pretty children too. And poor Jimmy, whose very soul is set on being a soldier as his father is. Are all his young hopes to be dashed?

Alas! What hope is there for any one in this cold world? For *her*—what hope?

Just now it seems to her as though to live is only to be unhappy. Every one seems to have forsaken her. Stamer is in Ireland still, and even if here, of what avail would he be? *He* does not love her.

And Marian—she too is still away travelling, where or with whom Evelyn scarcely cares to inquire. Indeed, the very thought of this old friend has of late become a torture to her. Gladly would she have blotted her from her memory, but memory, that treacherous thing, compels us often to bear in mind that which we would not, and lets us throw away that which we would eagerly retain. That Marian is away, and not likely to return for another week or so, has been a positive relief to Evelyn. Yet to dwell upon this change in her affection—to analyse it—would be a torture even keener than that other.

But now her mind, sitting on a bench in this silent garden, surrounded with all the dead things that implacable Nature has killed, leaves behind it love of the more material kind, and clings to that affection that is pure and unselfish.

How to help her uncle! How to get him out of this terrible trouble that has assailed not only him but his wife and children. Evelyn's nature, though essentially tender, is not without the practical tendency that all strong natures must

possess. It is not necessary that you must be hard-hearted because you have an ear and an eye open to the best ways of assuaging the evils of life. Many of the so-called practical ones of the earth are, when called upon for sympathy for the simplest cases, proved to be the tenderest souls of all—and the most helpful, because they can see their way to action of a useful kind.

Evelyn, sitting on her garden bench, tries hard to fight a way out of her difficulties. Can nobody help the colonel? Oh! that *she* could—*she*, who has been but a burden to him for all these years! Can she do nothing?

Like a lightning flash the face of Crawford rises before her. That kind man! If he—if she were to tell him——

A sense of faintness overpowers her. She clings to the iron arm of the garden seat, and the chill of it sends back strength into her body. No. It would be impossible. From him, of all people, after what had passed between them, it would be out of the question to accept a favour—unless—unless——

But the colonel. The children—Kitty——.

She has fallen back against the arm of the seat. A chill has broken out upon her brow. Her little hands have folded with a tight clench upon her gown. A breath that is only a long, long sob escapes her.

As the familiar click of the garden gate—the click that tells her somebody is coming—reaches her ears, she straightens herself, passes her fingers hurriedly across her smarting eyes, and turns to see Mr. Crawford looking anxiously down upon her.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

“You?” says she, trying to smile and holding out her hand to him. Crawford, taking her hand, retains it half unconsciously, and forgetting to return her greeting still gazes earnestly at her. She is evidently in sore distress. Her whole face is full of it. Her lips, in spite of her brave effort to appear as usual, are trembling, they have even taken a little mournful downward droop; sad *bistre* shades lie under her sweet eyes.

“You are in trouble,” says he at last.

"Why, we must all know trouble sometimes," says she with a gaiety that is very melancholy indeed. "Are you so altogether exempt from it, that you must wonder to see me sometimes sad?"

"I cannot bear to see you sad," says he. "And that's the truth. To see you as you are now is pain and grief to me. Will you——"

"No, no—I won't," cries she with a little choking laugh. "Come. Forget my worries, and tell me why you are paying me so early a visit to-day."

"Not *too* early. You are unhappy, and surely I can do something to help you. You accepted me as your friend, Evelyn. Prove that you were sincere when you offered me that kindly title. Let me do some small thing for you."

"You mustn't press me about this matter," says she earnestly. "I am bound not to speak of it. If it were entirely my own affair, I would show you at once how I regard you—but the colonel——"

"Oh, if it is the colonel," says he quickly, "I think I know something. He is in a certain difficulty—an easy one to manage, I should say, and you are troubled by it. Come, tell me everything, Evelyn. You see I know the best part of it—you will be breaking no faith with your uncle if you enlighten me a little as to the particulars of this matter. The colonel is *not* a man of business; I am. Come, speak to me."

He is so kind, so earnest, so reliable, that Evelyn, after a few moments' questioning of herself as to what she ought to do, tells him all the unhappy story of her uncle's trust betrayed, and the sad predicament into which that trust has led him.

"Pouf! if *that* is all," says Mr. Crawford, when he has heard her to the end; "why it can be arranged as simply as possible. The colonel, as it seems to me, owes some bank people two thousand pounds; *they* are not content to wait until such time as he shall be able to pay them. The thing, then, is to find somebody who can pay the bank people, and wait in *his* turn for payment. Do you see?"

"Oh! that is simple enough," says Evelyn, sighing. "The thing is, to find the agreeable person who is willing to undertake the colonel's debt."

"Nonsense, my dear child. Any one would do it. Here am I, for example. *I'll* do it," says Mr. Crawford, with an

enthusiasm, and a smile of very superior knowledge, meant to convince her of the absurdity of the doubt she has just suggested.

He had *meant* to be very clever. He has only succeeded, however, in making Miss D'Arcy give way to a passionate fit of crying. She cries, indeed, as if her heart were breaking—as perhaps it is.

"Oh! do you think I don't understand—that I don't see? Do you think I am a *fool*?" sobs she, pushing him away from her when he attempts to comfort her in the nervous, uncertain way that his present frame of mind will alone allow him. He is, indeed, frightened out of his wits. "No, no; it is out of the question. Neither you nor any one can help us."

"I don't know about the any one else, but *I* can," persists he firmly. "Be reasonable, Evelyn. Here am I, with more money than I know what to do with, and you would forbid me to lend a paltry sum to your uncle, a sum that would relieve him at once of all anxieties. Forgive me, if **you can**, for saying it—but surely you are a trifle selfish?"

"Lend—to *lend* two thousand pounds to the colonel! You know that the poor darling never could repay you," says she indignantly. "Oh! Mr. Crawford"—with a sudden revulsion of feeling—"I'm horrid to you, I know I am, but indeed the colonel would not borrow of any man."

"Then let me give it to you, and do you give it to him," says Crawford gently. "You spoke of friendship a moment since. Make it a real thing. Good heavens! you would take a fan, a perishable bunch of flowers, from me, why not, then, something that will make a being whom you love happy?"

He is still speaking, still pleading with her to let him help her, without one single thought or hope of reward in any shape; but her mind has slipped away from his and started on a journey of its own.

To help—to help her uncle. To help the colonel, who has been the best, the dearest friend to her that Heaven could send to any one. Oh, what an inducement is here! Again she hears the click of the garden gate, and now she tells herself that, as it opened, it was to admit Fate—*her* fate—who came marching down upon her pauseless, relentless.

If—if she were to accept this money, she must accept its giver too. Not only as a friend, but as a husband. This

is the one and only way in which the colonel could repay the loan of this two thousand pounds.

Two thousand pounds ! She laughs to herself inwardly—, a cruel laugh—as she assets herself at just so much. Surely a little sum to receive as value for all one's young sweet life.

She grows a little faint, and white, and cold. A sacrifice they would call it, but a small one, surely, when counted against the care and love of all these years ; and the colonel had been a father to her, the gentlest, the tenderest, whilst Kitty—oh, there were few like Kitty. And now she was sitting in there, not even daring to cry or give her heart relief in any way, so miserable was she about the poor colonel.

Oh, no ! it is not so great a sacrifice, after all. Of what use is her life, to what direction does it incline ? It is rudderless, valueless, drifting here and there, and with no settled object to guide it safely into any port.

If Eaton could have loved her ! At this supreme moment of her existence she speaks plainly to herself, and lets the little ordinary defences with which women love to guard and clothe themselves, and with which they pretend to hide themselves *from* themselves, slip from her. Her heart and she stand naked, face to face ; they have flung aside all disguises, and look back at each other with a sad and terrible regard.

No. He does not love her. He would never have gone away without telling her so—if such a blessed secret had lain within his breast. *Then*, when she was ill and in great pain, and very sad at heart. No, he went ; he left no gentle word behind him. He had left only unfriendly looks and words.

And Marian had gone too. The poor child—poor Evelyn—had shrunk from the farewell words given to *her*. But Marian had seen nothing of it, and had kissed her warmly with a sort of nervous, prophetic feeling as they parted. Yet it was with a passionate sense of relief that Evelyn had seen her best friend go, and the keenest sense of happiness she had yet known lay in the thought that she would not be back again for two long months—short months, as it seemed to Evelyn.

Then, with a life so spoiled, where lies the sacrifice ? Mr. Crawford—kind, gentle, generous—loves her. Other people have *not* loved her ! The very bitterness in this last thought serves to sustain her.

Mr. Crawford is still talking, still trying to persuade her to accept his assistance for her uncle. It takes very long to write what takes but a moment or two to think. Evelyn, with her mind made up, pauses in her desire to bring matters to a conclusion, and with a little desperate gesture of the right hand, looks out towards the south, where now the sun is struggling through the clouds and sending a chilly ray or two upon the dull and dismal earth. She feels her cheeks are blanched, her tongue lifeless. If she *must* speak, must give up her life, at least he need not know how begrudgingly is the gift bestowed.

If he *did* know, so honest and loyal is he, that probably he would refuse it, and then the colonel would be ruined indeed—and Kitty and Jimmy, and the children!

She is conscious suddenly that Crawford has ceased speaking, and that he is looking at her.

"You are silent," says he.

"I have been thinking," says the girl in a low tone. Her eyes are fastened on the turf beneath her feet, her very lips are white. "May I tell you of my thoughts?"

"You know you can tell me anything," says he gravely.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"You remember," says she steadily, but with extreme nervousness, "the day when you came to see me after you saved me from falling down that precipice?"

"I remember."

"Do you remember, too, what you said to me upon that day? If—if you *don't*——" a lovely shamed red covering all her features.

"I do," says Crawford with sudden and eager emphasis.

"How could you believe I might forget?"

"Well"—turning aside her face, and struggling for a moment for that calm that is so hard to make one's own when one most desires it—"I have changed my mind about my answer to you that day, if—if you have not changed yours."

"I should have to be born again before I could change mine," says Mr. Crawford. "But——"

"Yes, yes, I know," says the poor child eagerly. "You

want to know why I say one thing to-day and another thing yesterday. It is your goodness to the colonel that has altered me. If you will help him—and if you will take my worthless life in exchange for that help—I——”

“Enough, Evelyn,” says he, putting up his hand. “I don’t think, perhaps, that you quite understand me. It is your happiness I desire, not your misery. You think to buy peace of mind for your uncle by the giving up of all your own. And you have done me the wrong to believe that I am the man to help you. No!” He smiles at her very kindly, and taking one of her little cold hands presses it reassuringly. “We shall arrange for your uncle on better terms than that,” says he, with quite an assumption of cheerfulness.

“But listen to me. Why—*why* is it that you refuse me? Is it that you have changed?” cries she, tears rushing to her lovely eyes.

“Oh, Evelyn!” says he.

“Well, hear me then. You say you love me. If you do, you are the only man on earth except the colonel who cares at all for me; and I thought——”

“Are you sure of that, Evelyn?” very gravely now, and with some agitation.

“Oh, *so sure!*” says she. There is a suggestion of despair in her voice as she says this that should have warned him, but by an unlucky chance he does not notice it.

“Then—then if I might indeed dare to hope——” he pauses. “If there is no other before me I will risk it,” says he, more confidently now. “Though I would have you understand that I know how it is between us. You would help your uncle. But, Evelyn, if there is no one else——”

“There is no one,” says she calmly. “No one loves me but you—if indeed you do.”

“Can you have a doubt?” says he reproachfully. He lifts her hand and presses it to his lips. “What I only meant to convey was, that, but for this trouble of your uncle’s I understand fully I should not be so blessed as I now count myself. I prefer that we should both fully understand that. In time—in time——” He breaks off abruptly. All in one moment, as it were, he has grown young—handsome. The girl, looking at him, tells herself that she has never known how good to look at he is, until just now. Happiness is the one great beautifier. If Mons.

Rimmell or his *confrères* could but catch that fleeting ecstasy and bottle it, what prodigious fortunes would be theirs!

"You know what I mean," says he, patting her hand softly—the little cold hand that lies so listlessly in his; "that as yet you do not love me, but at least you love no one else."

"You are right—you are right," says she hastily. "I do not love you quite in *that* way, but——"

"It is enough; I will trust for the rest. Time is a great tonic." Alas! had *he* found it so? "And now we start with no mistakes between us. I am fully reconciled to the thought that but for the misfortunes of the colonel, which," with a little smile, "I scarcely deplore, you would not have said to me the words you did to-day."

"That is true," says she simply; "yet I would say something more to you, as," with a gentle glance, "confession seems to be the order of the day. I do not love you, truly, as you love me; but still I bear you *some* kind of love. Believe that. Believe, too," gazing at him with earnest eyes, "that I feel no shrinking from my marriage with you, no desire to draw back from it. Hear me yet a moment," says she, putting up her hand to check him as she sees him about to interrupt her. "I fear you may imagine that because of the colonel's trouble I am accepting you; but it is not wholly so. If I hated you I would not marry you, *even* to save the colonel."

"I know that. Oh, Evelyn! I wonder if *you* know how sweet a nature is yours."

"Ah, you love me. You are prejudiced," says she, with a faint smile. "Others, who do not love me, do not find me so faultless. And you, too," sighing quickly, "will find me out in time."

"I shall," says he confidently. "I shall find you even dearer than I now hold you. And, oh, how much that means. Well, is that all you have to tell me?"

"All I think."

"Something more, surely. I am curious to know how I inspired in you the friendship you feel for me. I do not doubt it, you see."

"You need not. Ever since that first day we met—you remember it?"

"Do you think I could forget?"

"Ever since that day, then, I have felt an attraction

towards you ; a strange desire to be with you, to know you well—a desire as unaccountable as strange. I am not given to sudden friendship,” says she slowly ; “ I am un-girlish in that. But you, you seemed to draw me to you. I felt you were my friend—a real friend. It was”—dreamily—“ as though I had known you before somewhere—as if, in some past day, you had been mixed up with me or mine in some close way ; and as if in that vague past you had——. I don’t know,” breaking off with a little shake of her head. “ It is all a mere fancy, of course—but it really *has* seemed to me as if you were in some way bound to me, as if were I to ask you to do anything for me, you would certainly not refuse to do it.”

“ As if I owed you something,” suggests he with a touch of tender amusement.

“ Well, yes—that is it really,” says she laughing. “ Absurd, wasn’t it ? ”

“ Far from it. It was prophetic rather. Do you think I owe you nothing now, when you have promised to give your whole dear life into my keeping ? ”

“ Oh, as for that,” says she, “ I am the gainer, and not you. What joy you can give to those I love ! ”

“ Don’t let us think of it in that way,” says he hastily. “ I am selfish if you will, but give a little thought to me. You give me joy too. And surely that first dream of yours pointed this way.”

“ Perhaps so,” faintly. “ At all events,” with a sudden memory that gives her courage, “ I know, that as I thought of you, I always believed and trusted in you.”

She pauses. There is something in the innocent exaltation of her manner that forbids expressed emotion. Crawford contents himself with a loving glance at her.

“ Yes, yes, it is a dream,” says she. “ No more. But I can hardly divest myself of the belief that sometime you had an interest for me, even before we met.”

“ A happy belief for me,” says he radiantly. “ And now you have asked me to accept a belief of yours, I, in my turn, will ask you to believe in a certain statement of mine. It is a rather vain one, I suppose, but—I do not want you to regard me as *quite* an ancient. I know appearances are against me. But I am not as old as I look.”

Evelyn turns her eyes on him.

“ Believe that, *try* to believe it,” says he eagerly. “ Those

ten years in the East told upon me terribly." He pauses. Was it the ten years of the Eastern climate that had changed his hair from black to grey, or was it the insatiable remorse, that night and day travelled with him that had done it?

"I have so often heard about that," says she. "The change of climate, for one thing; and the hot sun out there, and——"

"Yes. That, and——. However, it *told* upon me," says he abruptly.

"I think you scarcely do yourself justice," says she. "Certainly," sweetly, "you do not flatter yourself! Why should you imagine that you look like an old man?" In truth, he looks like anything but that now, with this fresh flush of happiness on cheek and brow.

"Why need I," says he, laughing gaily, "when you are here to do the flattering for me. Yes, I am old when compared with you. Still, not old enough to be your grandfather."

"Or my father, either," says she with a suspicion of his gaiety. Then, as the word passes her lips, she changes; the smile dies; her colour fades. "My father," says she slowly, reluctantly. "Oh! he was a very, *very* old man."

"*An old man!*" repeats Crawford mechanically. What tragic words; what horrible memories they evoke. Her evident grief is unseen by him, the very hour, the place is forgotten. The heavenly sweetness of this moment spent with her, and adorned by her presence, dies from him. All in one second is a blank. All save the cruel realities of the awful past.

Beneath his feet, as he stares downwards, with eyes convulsed and bloodshot, the green fresh grass disappears and resolves itself into an old and faded carpet. It begins to spread itself over a room—a small room, and there—there! where the rhododendron should be, a bookcase upraises itself. And that rose bush over there. Is it a rose bush, or an *escritoire*? Oh, Heaven! Again—*again!*

What is this thing that lies upon the carpet? This silent, outstretched motionless thing. An old man! A "very, *very* old man," said she. Oh, how horrible it is! Why can't he stir? A hand, a foot. Great and kind God! What an uplifting of the whole mind of one poor human creature might not be achieved by such a miracle.

Silent! Motionless! No sound! An old man! And pale, *pale*, and with the mouth a little twisted so, and ———
What is this?

This shiny, creeping thread that steals down the dull white cheek. What is it? Blood! *Blood!*

"You are thinking of something that makes you sad," says Evelyn, laying her hand suddenly in his and by the sweet magic of her touch breaking the dire enchantment that is crushing him. "Do not be sad to-day. To-day, that has given me to you."

There is entreaty in her tone, but nothing of the sweet shyness that belongs to happy lovers. If he had not been so entirely wrapped up in the terrible memories that belong to him, he might have noticed that she betrays no curiosity as to his secret musings, no desire to learn the trouble that lies so heavily upon his heart.

She feels a little increase of the melancholy that has made its own of her for many weeks past. She must be always sad, but he——. Oh, surely, if this sacrifice has to be made, one at least might be allowed to rejoice in it.

"Speak to me," says she softly, closing her fingers around his.

"I was dreaming," says he, throwing up his head, as if gasping for breath, and drawing in the chill wintry air in one deep sigh.

"A bad dream?" says she kindly but indifferently.

"We all have had dreams sometimes," says he with an effort.

"And yours?" She is indifferent still, but it seems impossible not to put some kind of question to him.

"What should it be?" says he with an attempt at lightness.

"Ah! That's what I ask," returns she, a slight curiosity moving her now as she catches his effort at evasion.

"Why—If all this happy day were to fade away, and I found you had repented yourself and cast me from you into my former desolation. Would not that be a bad dream?"

He curses himself inwardly as he thus lies to her.

"Was that yours?" says she.

He makes a little movement of acquiescence—words are beyond him.

"I shall not do that," says she simply. "I have given

you my word ; it is as good as my bond. Do not make yourself sad with such a thought as that."

"*Evelyn!*" says he. Anguish and despair cry aloud and enter into that piteous, vague appeal to her. Oh! was ever mortal in such sore straits as he? A murderer—without intent—without *punishment*. Without the courage to avow the crime, and suffer for it! Oh! if atonement might be made *without* the avowal.

He clings to the hand she has given him, as though in her nearness, her purity, lies his one chance of escape from the demon that night and day pursues him: that most relentless of all devils—Memory.

"You pay me a poor compliment," says she smiling gently. "Be sad to-morrow if you will, but not to-day. I have been thinking over it all, but *my* meditations," with a pretty reproach, "have not disheartened me. I am glad that you spoke so openly: that you understand so entirely how it is; that there are no secrets between us."

"No. No secrets. None," says he in a stunned sort of way.

"That is a comfort," says she earnestly. "I should be a bad hand at pretending. But now you will not expect too much from me. And you cannot know," sweetly, "how happy you have made me. What a weight you have taken off my shoulders! The colonel——" She starts. "Oh!" cries she, "how selfish I have been——" (selfish, poor child!) "I had forgotten the colonel! And he is so miserable all this time—whilst I have had it in my power to cheer him, yet forgot it. It seems to me as though he must know because I did. May I go to him and tell him everything, or will you?"

"I will go," says Crawford rising; "I can explain more fully. Can I tell him, Evelyn, that you are doing this thing of your own accord? That you feel no regret?"

"None," decisively. "Put faith in me. You will go then? Thank you."

"I shall see you again?"

"Not to-day," says she quietly. "To-morrow, if you will. I shall have a good deal to say to Kitty, and—a good deal to say to myself."

"Until to-morrow, then," says he, holding out his hand. He hesitates perceptibly; then stooping presses his lips long and fervently to her brow.

The tears have rushed into her eyes.

"Good-bye," says she making him a little parting gesture of adieu.

CHAPTER XXXV.

YESTERDAY! How long ago was yesterday? A year? Twenty-four hours? A lifetime?

A lifetime surely. The twenty-four hours' theory is absurd.

Just now, leaning back in her chair, it all seems like a dream to Evelyn. Yet she has gone through her second interview with her—with Mr. Crawford. With a determination worthy of a Spartan, she has from the very first spoken of and compelled herself to think of Mr. Crawford as her future husband. But even the Spartan boy must have had his weak moments like the poorest of us, and this is one of Evelyn's.

Yet regret for her promise to him is hardly her strongest feeling. Regret rather for the love that *could* have been given to another, and is now lying so worthlessly upon her hands, is eating her heart away. And above and beyond all, this new responsibility—this knowledge that she has irrevocably broken with the old life, and merged herself in another, is holding every thought in thrall.

There had been a bad quarter of an hour with Kitty.

The colonel, good man, who had not dreamed of any one as a lover for the little girl, whom he still regarded as a child, was first amazed, then disconcerted, then amazed again, and finally pleased by Crawford's proposal. If for one moment he had known or thought that Evelyn had accepted Crawford to save him from his difficulties—it would be doing him but the barest justice to say that he would have scorned Crawford's advances, and compelled Evelyn to break off, what would have appeared to his kindly soul, a most unholy alliance. But that Evelyn's heart had been attracted by another was unknown to the colonel, and if surprised that she should accept a man as old as Crawford, he saw no reason for forbidding the banns.

Feeling still puzzled, he had argued the matter out with her, and she had been clever enough to mystify him completely. Any one could have mystified the colonel—~~who~~ took everybody's word as gospel.

But Kitty had been harder to deal with. There had been, as I said, a short time with her, that had nearly undone Evelyn.

"Tell me the truth, Evelyn," said she, coming into the girl's bedroom and closing the door behind her with an air that half frightened Evelyn. "Do not prevaricate with me. Do you honestly *wish* to marry Mr. Crawford—or is it for us you are——"

"Nonsense, Kitty!" interrupting her hastily—"I am——"

"It is *not* nonsense," says Mrs. D'Arcy with more passion than she has ever yet shown in her genial life. "It is a sin—a *crime*, if it proves to be what I think it. Evelyn—do you know that if a woman loves one man and deliberately marries another she is wantonly destroying two—perhaps three lives?"

"Well?" says Evelyn a little stubbornly. All this is part of it, she tells herself.

"Well?—well?" with angry impatience. "Is that all you have to say to me? Do you mean to tell me there is no one you prefer to Mr. Crawford? To that man who is old enough to be——"

"Do you know, Kitty," says Miss D'Arcy, who has grown deadly pale, "that perhaps you do not altogether understand what you are doing? I am going to marry Mr. Crawford *quite* of my own free will, and——"

"I don't believe it," says Kitty, who has now got beyond all control.

"It is true, for all that."

"Evelyn! don't speak to me like that! What has happened to you—to the little pretty child I took and loved as my own some years ago? Am I not a mother to you? Don't speak to me so coldly. Do you think I have not watched you as you grew—that every secret of your heart has not been made plain to me? That when Eaton Stamer came here——"

"Now *there*!" interrupts Evelyn, with a stamp of her foot, "not another word! I *won't* bear it!" She has flung down the brush she had been pretending to brush her hair with, and as it falls with a noisy clatter to the ground she advances on Mrs. D'Arcy. "Eaton Stamer may have come here, and you may have imagined that I thought as you did, that he came here because he—he—— Oh!

what nonsense it all is," putting up her hand to her pretty head, as if action is necessary to her. "Misconceptions of this kind are the commonest things of all. Eaton Stamer is my friend—no more. I am his friend—no more, I assure you. I must entreat you, Kitty, to be a little less romantic in your views of me for the future."

"You mean——" says Mrs. D'Arcy slowly.

"That Mr. Crawford and I will suit each other admirably."

"You mean, rather, that I am to be silent on the subject. But, Evelyn, I *can't* be that. Nothing—not all the cold and cruel things you could say to me—would convince me that this marriage is for your happiness."

"Then I won't say them," says Evelyn, with a short laugh. "And you, for your part, don't say cruel things to me. Once for all, Kitty," turning suddenly upon her a white face and eyes as dark as night, "take this to heart. You may believe it or not as you like, but I am marrying Mr. Crawford because I *want* to marry him, and if you think that Eaton Stamer is in love with me, you make a great mistake. Now, will *that* do?"

"Yes, yes, I suppose so," says Mrs. D'Arcy miserably. She moves towards the door, hesitates, and finally coming swiftly back flings her arms round the girl's slight tense body.

"Oh! darling! darling!" cries she, bursting into tears.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CRAWFORD, coming out from the colonel's presence as Evelyn's accepted suitor, had stepped into the chill pathways of the winter woods with a heart on fire. The colonel had not been altogether complimentary, and had taken the matter of Crawford's ability to save him from his creditors (who after all were not his) as a very secondary consideration when compared with Evelyn's well-being.

Still, it was over; the interview at an end, and the dearest wish of his heart completed. Evelyn would marry him, and there was something about her that compelled him to believe that though she was not actually in love with him, that yet it was of her own free will that she had

consented to be his. Surely no man on earth was happier than he.

Happy!

Suddenly the old cloud fell upon him. His heaven departed, the barest possibilities of life were his—no more. He could have laughed aloud at his madness of a moment since, when all things seemed within his grasp—when he had dared to dream of joy and peace and love! Surely he of all men should be the last to seek to win one second's pleasure from *life*—he who had destroyed life! The very word had become a terror to him, being the key-note to all his misery—*Life taken*.

What was there left him then, save death? His heart was full of it. The very wintry air as he walked along through the decaying woods spoke of nothing else. The dry dull rustle of the leaves beneath his feet sang an eternal requiem.

It was one of his worst moments. The reaction after the unexpected glimpse of bliss the morning had shown him was all the more severe. Now and again he could forget, but not for long; his broken heart was like the deep fissure in a rock that time had overgrown with ferns and trailing grasses and all sweet weeds, but that still had its terrible rent beneath. Nothing could hide it completely; a chance wind came and blew aside the kindly creeping greeneries, and there it showed a ghastly, deadly, fathomless hole.

He went home, and made his way to his library, and there, sinking into his chair, lets his arms fall upon the table and his head fall on them, and so rests, thinking, thinking always, trying to work this matter out. It is an old attitude with him. The servants, who adore him, are quite accustomed to come in and find him so at times, and have now almost ceased to gossip about it amongst themselves.

Can he accept this happiness, or shall he renounce it? If she knew! Why then the question would be solved once for all. But if she *never* knew! Will he love her, or cherish her one whit the less, because of this dire secret that lies upon his soul? And she too; there is a secret there. Her father! What was the mystery about him? It had been darkly hinted at, but never clearly told. Never would be. Something discreditable beyond question. Something damnatory. *Crime* of some sort. Well, if he

did not seek to learn about her father's past life, should he not cry quits with her, if he refrained from telling her of his?

But must this curse follow him for all time? Oh, Heaven! cannot even her sweet spirit exorcise it? Is there no hope—no way of escape? Must that awful thing pursue him, lying before his mental vision clearly for ever—and ever?

Suddenly, as he rested there with his face hidden, it came to him again.

He sprang to his feet with a curse, and put out his hands as though to thrust it back. His lips grew livid, his eyes staring. Once again he stood within that silent library, and at his feet the old man lay! So still! so quiet! That clenched hand flung out, those dull eyes half showing, the nostrils pinched! And again—*again*, that thin stream of blood slowly, slowly creeping downwards to the parted lips.

An awful groan breaks from the wretched dreamer. He presses his hands against his glaring eye-balls, and staggering back against the bookcase, leans there as if exhausted. A cruel sigh bursts from him, and with it, words full of heart-rending supplication. Almost unconsciously they fall from his lips. Old words, and beautiful, half-forgotten, but now welling up within him in his agony:

"Oh, hear Thou in heaven, thy dwelling-place, and when Thou hearest, *forgive!*"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MISS VANDELEUR, coming home specially early one morning, feeling tired and rather overdone after her journey, gives herself into the hands of her maid, with a view to going to bed as quickly as possible, and staying there until late in the afternoon.

The dull cold light of the wintry day is creeping into the room with animosity sufficient to almost put out the fire. But nothing puts out a maid when she has got news to tell, and presently Miss Vandeleur is in full possession of the facts about Evelyn's engagement to Mr. Crawford.

Marian twists her head out of her maid's hands.

"Is it true?" says she, looking at Matilda Jane with as

much astonishment mingled with disapprobation as even a Matilda Jane could have desired.

"Oh, yes, m'. All the world's 'eard of it."

"Then what are you doing?" says Miss Vandeleur sharply. "Put up my hair again. I'm going out. I'll have a bath and a cup of tea, and tell George to have the carriage round in half an hour."

"But after your journey, m', surely."

"Hurry, Matilda," says Miss Vandeleur, rather more sharply still.

It seems to her indeed as if no one can hurry enough. A marriage such as *that*. Monstrous! It must be put a stop to *at once*. And of course quite easily. Evelyn is a perfect baby, but reasonable. Though really after *this*——

At the D'Arcys, learning that Evelyn has just finished breakfast and is now in her own room, she pushes aside the servant who would have announced her, and running rapidly upstairs, enters Evelyn's room without a word of warning, or even the usual knock.

"What is this thing I have heard, Evelyn?" says she, going quickly over to the girl, who is standing before her glass, brushing out her hair, through pure idleness as it seems, as she had brushed it before, only an hour ago. "It isn't true, I *hope*?"

"Why should you *nope* it? And how d'ye do, Marian?" with a little laugh. "You seem to forget we have not seen each other for a month or two."

"I forget everything, except this extraordinary news. What am I to understand by your manner? That it *is* true?"

"If you mean my engagement to Mr. Crawford, it is certainly true," says Evelyn coldly.

"Oh, Evelyn!" Then "why have you done this thing?" cries she. "What is the meaning of it? I have heard a good deal. But even to save your uncle—oh, surely there were other ways."

"I have not said it was to save the colonel," says Evelyn, who is fast growing into her most impossible mood.

"No. But I can guess. What is the matter with you? Your voice, your very face is changed, Evelyn."

"I don't believe Irish air is good for English people," says Evelyn, with a rather nasty little laugh. "If I'm changed, what are you? And what is it all about? I have promised to marry Mr. Crawford—I am quite willing to

marry him. I can't for a moment imagine why you are making all this fuss about it."

"Don't you?" Miss Vandeleur leans forward and gazes earnestly into her friend's face. There is something in the intensity of her regard that annoys Evelyn; she turns aside with a slightly haughty movement of her shoulders.

"Don't treat me in this way, Evelyn. We used to be friends. Surely we are so still. If you were my own sister I could not love you more. No, don't turn your face away, let me look at you."

"Look then!" says Evelyn, with a strange little smile, turning her eyes full upon Marian.

"It is a terrible thing," says the latter, with great agitation. "How am I to regard it? You *can't* be in love with him. It is impossible, and besides——" she hesitates and breaks off. "If you tell me you love him, I'll believe you," says she; "but I know you can't. May and December! A strange alliance! Who induced you to throw away your life like this?"

"Mr. Crawford, naturally."

"I don't believe it."

"You are an old friend, as you say. You have of course the right to be rude. But——"

"What nonsense!" interrupting her warmly. "You may as well listen calmly to me, Evelyn, because I shan't leave this house until I *quite* understand how it is with you. I know you are not in love with Mr. Crawford, and therefore I regard this projected marriage as iniquitous. If you were any one else I should say you were doing it for the sake of his money, but being yourself, I feel you are doing it for the sake of the colonel. If it is only a question of getting your uncle out of his difficulties, why *I* have money—I can arrange for all that—I—— Oh! *why* didn't you write to me?"

"You take everything for granted," says Evelyn, with a touch of passion. "Why should you imagine me unhappy in this engagement? What earthly reason is there that I should *not* marry him?"

"Because, for one thing, he is old enough to be your father, and for another——" she pauses; again a look in the young girl's face checks her.

"Well? For another?" defiantly.

"As I said before, you are not in love with him."

"No," slowly, "that is quite true. I am not in love with him. But," raising fraudulent eyes to hers, and flinging up her head, "I am not in love with any one else either. I am sure I am one of those uninteresting people who will never be in love. Never—*never!*" with absolute vehemence.

Miss Vandeleur, as if silenced by it, stands with downcast eyes. Wordless, but unmistakably unconvinced.

Something in this calm disbelief in what she has said rouses Evelyn to greater impatience.

"You don't believe me," says she. "But is love *everything*? Is it so great a necessity that all the world must succumb to it? Are there no other virtues? He is kind, thoughtful. I like him; I find pleasure in his society. Is all that nothing?"

"Evelyn," begins Miss Vandeleur, but Evelyn with a little gesture of the hand refuses to hear her.

"Well, I shall speak to the colonel," says Miss Vandeleur with decision. "I can't think what he is about, to sanction such a marriage?"

"To speak to the colonel!" cries Evelyn with a start. "Why? what has it got to do with him? One would think I was a baby the way you all treat me. If you *must* know"—wrathfully—"Mr. Crawford has been very good about the colonel's troubles, but I won't have it put into the colonel's mind that I am marrying Mr. Crawford simply to benefit him. It isn't true. Do you hear, Marian? It isn't true; and I forbid you to meddle with my affairs. No one shall allow, or not allow, my marrying whom I choose!"

"Of course not," gently; she turns a little aside, as though she cannot bear to look at the girl's flushed cheeks and gleaming eyes, and determined, pained little mouth. "Only—when one is your friend. When one *loves* you!"

There is a silence, during which neither of them seems to breathe, and then suddenly Evelyn bursts into a bitter flood of tears.

"I am behaving badly to you—I know it. But I have been so worried about all this," cries she, "and—though that is not my motive for marrying him," lying piously all through—"still it will be such a help to the colonel, and Kitty, and all the children. So much I confess; but I beg—I *insist*," angrily—"that you will understand that I like Mr. Crawford for himself—that I think he is one of the best men on earth."

"He is a very estimable man," says Marian soothingly. But when she would have attempted to put her arms round the girl Evelyn repulses her gently but decidedly; and, as though her very touch has chilled her, her tears cease, and the little touch of softness that had come with them disappears.

"As I have told you, I am not a loving sort of person," says she. "And therefore it really doesn't matter whom I marry."

The glaring absurdity of this speech is unnoticed by Marian, whose mind is indeed bent upon another matter altogether.

"How you insist on that!" says she. Going up to Evelyn she lays her hands upon her shoulders, and compels her to look at her. "It seems to me you do protest too much, Evelyn. Believe me, this is a matter of life and death. And you may not wrong only yourself but another."

"I shall not wrong Mr. Crawford," says Evelyn in a little stony way.

"No. Not Mr. Crawford. You would wrong no one *knowingly*. But—I thought there was some one else!"

Evelyn's first impulse is to fling her from her. But she restrains herself.

"That thought was folly," says she, with so much gentleness that the coldness underlying it can hardly be resented. "You mean Eaton Stamer, of course."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"Yes," says Marian nervously, being a good deal startled by this direct mention of Eaton's name. Evelyn regards her curiously.

"I fancied so. But I think he and I have been friends too long to be ever anything more."

"Is that so, Evelyn?" very gravely.

"Entirely so. I assure you, you need not be uneasy." She smiles rather superciliously. "Why should it not be so? Is it not a reasonable idea? Oh! you may believe me, if it will give you any comfort."

"It gives me great comfort," gently.

"Yes—yes. I know all about that." She pulls herself together involuntarily, and raises her hand to her head as if to still the throbbings of the nervous brain within. If anything had been left to tell her that Marian was desirous of marrying Eaton, here now it is, disclosed to her!

"Besides," says she bitterly, "you forget! It is a most fortunate thing that Eaton and I did not fall in love with each other—that is the orthodox phrase, is it not?" with a cold little laugh. "Because assuredly Lady Stamer would not have welcomed me as a daughter-in-law."

"That is beside the question," says Marian decidedly.

"Is it? It is part of it surely? A penniless girl she would never countenance."

"That is nothing. Eaton has money of his own."

"You go too far," cries Evelyn, rising suddenly and looking almost tall as she stands frowning down upon the other. "Eaton—I *swear* to you, if you want so strong confirmation—is nothing to me, nor am I anything to Eaton; and as for his mother, be certain of this—I am not the daughter for her, whatever you may be."

It is a rather direct attack; it had not been premeditated, and had sprung only from the girl's sore heart. Her eyes being, however, fixed on Marian, she cannot fail to see that from pale, Miss Vandeleur's cheeks have turned to pink, and from that to richest carmine.

It is a revelation. That Marian might have made up her mind to marry him, and so join the two estates, is one thing; to know that she *loves* him is another. Evelyn's heart sinks low, her lips whiten. A full minute goes by.

"Is it so?" says she at last very gently. "It never seemed to me quite true, until this moment. You love him, then?"

"How? Love him? I don't know what you mean, Evelyn," says Miss Vandeleur with, if possible, a deepening of her colour, and a certain disconnection in her speech.

"They all told me so," says the girl, with unconscious melancholy; "but somehow I never believed it. It was foolish of me, wasn't it?" with a poor attempt at a smile. "What every one says is always right; I *should* have known—but"—with terrible pathos—"I didn't."

"Well, so perhaps should I," says the other haughtily; "but I am still as ignorant as I can be."

"You may not wish to speak of it; I—" very calmly, yet

with a touch of feeling—"can quite understand that, and you needn't speak of it. I know now all about it." There is weariness in her tone, but no longer any agitation; in truth it is all over. Nothing can matter very much, and as she must marry Mr. Crawford it is just as well that there is nothing—nothing—*nothing* in the world to care for.

"You know *what*?" demands Marian impatiently. "Come, Evelyn," going closer to her and laying a compelling hand upon her shoulder, "I insist on knowing what all this is about."

"Oh, what nonsense!" says Evelyn, a little impatient in her turn. "Why make a mystery of it? Everybody knows—everybody is looking forward to it; I alone disbelieved." She pauses, and presses her fingers to her forehead as though some pain lies there. "Curious, wasn't it?" says she. "Lookers-on see most of the game; yet I looked on as well as they, and though they could see I couldn't."

"*They*?" says Miss Vandeleur, almost passionately; "and who were '*they*,' may I ask, and what had I done to make me—*me*," growing very pale, and regarding Evelyn with angry eyes, "a subject of gossip for the county?"

"People will talk, you see," says Evelyn a little bitterly. "Even you may not be exempt from gossip, and what, then, is to be hoped for me? And after all," raising sad eyes to hers—eyes in which lie deep reproach—"if you do love him, why deny it? Is he not worthy to be loved? I have known Eaton for many years, and——"

"Eaton—*Eaton* Stamer!" cries Marian, interrupting her vehemently. The words seem to have been forced from her, have broken from her against her will. A second later she would have recalled the impulsive outburst, but it is now too late; Evelyn has heard—has guessed.

Indeed, over Evelyn a strange change has passed. Her eyes seem to dominate every other feature, and shine out from her white face with a singular brilliance.

"If not Eaton——" begins she in a voice as strange as her expression, and then stops dead short. The truth has reached her, has forced itself upon her. "Oh, Marian," says she feebly; a revulsion of feeling renders her absolutely faint. If there was no truth in that lying story—if he was nothing to Marian, and if Marian was—— But how to be sure of that?

But, oh, if it is all, all true, how will it be with *her*? If

the small, happy fancies that at times have found root in her heart have been honestly healthy plants, and are still growing, how will it be with her then? But they are not true, those fancies—she tells herself so with a passionate fervour. If he had loved her he would have spoken before leaving her for long, *long* months. The old affection for Marian, chilled but not killed, rises again within her heart, increased a thousandfold. She too is unhappy, and in the same way; she loves, and knows no love in return. The tears rush into Evelyn's eyes. Alas! how sad a world it is.

She turns to Miss Vandeleur and would have taken her hand, but the other refuses to see her attempt.

"You will forget what has been said, Evelyn," says she in a harsh voice. There is no entreaty in her tone, but as she speaks she seems to compel the girl's regard. "Think what you will; it will be false."

Evelyn, lifting her eyes to hers, is shocked by the havoc the last few minutes have made in the usually calm face.

"I know nothing," says she gently.

"Remember nothing either."

"Not until I *may*," says Evelyn softly. Then suddenly she bursts into a storm of tears, and flings herself into Miss Vandeleur's arms. "Oh, for you—for *you* there is hope," sobs she; "for me, *none*." The cry seems to come from a bruised heart. "I was abominable to you just now, Marian, but I thought—I thought you were in love with Eaton. Hush! there is no use in speaking; it is all over. He does not care for me, and—the other *does*, and—I wish I was dead."

"Evelyn, Evelyn!" says Miss Vandeleur in a sort of desperation.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"It's a *shame*!" says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, with all the emphasis that belongs to her. She has one young man on her right and another young man on her left, and is feeling so happy that she believes herself to be virtuous.

"What's a shame?" demands Lady Stamer with a supercilious glance at the first speaker. She feels herself so entirely beyond Mrs. Wylding-Weekes both temporally and

spiritually, that she hardly puts her best foot foremost when entering on a scrimmage with her, and therefore seldom comes off anything but second best.

"Why this projected marriage between that pretty Evelyn D'Arcy and the old man who hangs round here," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, without a pang of remorse at the vulgarity of her speech.

They are all "hanging round here" just now. Mr. Crawford having invited almost everybody to a day's skating on his lakes, and to tea and etceteras afterwards, everybody has accepted the invitation and has come.

"If you mean Mr. Crawford," says Lady Stamer with a sneering severity that would have subdued anybody but Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, but is completely thrown away upon her, "I think you take a distinctly wrong view of the case. To me, she appears in no other light save as an exceptionally fortunate girl."

"Ah!" says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. There is a good deal of contempt for the person answered conveyed in this seemingly simple monosyllable. As a fact, Mrs. Wylding-Weekes holds no one in reverence. The Archbishop of Canterbury himself would be to her, if brought into immediate connection with him, a mere common mortal and nothing more. "That's because you know nothing about it," says she presently.

"To know nothing at all about it" is the one happy state of life," says Mr. Blount with prophetic instinct. As usual he is on the spot.

"That is to be distinctly deceitful, Bartholomew," says Lady Stamer, addressing Mr. Blount but pointing her remark at Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. "One must be a person of remarkably distorted views of what is right and what is wrong to give way to such a sentiment as that."

"Well, he may be right, or he may be wrong," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes impartially; "but as far as he goes I agree with him. Them's *my* sentiments too." She laughs in an altogether aggravating way.

"They are *not* mine," says Lady Stamer sternly, trying to look down this obnoxious young woman and failing miserably.

"They wouldn't, of course," says the obnoxious young woman; "'t isn't good enough for you, is it? You haven't lived up to this style of thing. Time's up for you, eh?"

But, I assure you, Batty has hit a truth. He's done it in the eye. *He* knows!"

"He knows what I do *not*—the new *argot*," says Lady Stamer crushingly. "I do not aspire to such knowledge. I confess it is beyond me—beyond the compass of *most* well-bred people."

"Beyond *me*, you mean," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes unembarrassed, and, in effect, rather delighted with this prospect of a row royal. She happens to be in great feather, to-day—literally speaking—her frock being Parisian and beyond question.

To be well gowned is to be of good spirit, as most people will acknowledge. In that delightful book, "Backlog Studies," the author tells us that in Boston they hold the opinion, "That there is a satisfaction in being well dressed which religion cannot give."

This is perhaps going far—but not farther than the honest truth will carry some people. Mrs. Wylding-Weekes is at heart a Bostonian.

"But I'm not so entirely out of it as you moral people may wish to believe," says she beaming cordially upon Lady Stamer, who detests her. "I'm full of the loveliest sentiments! I believe in all the old trash. Such as love, for example."

"That is not trash," says Lady Stamer. "Nobody with a heart could call it so."

"No. Nobody with a heart," says her tormentor.

"To return to our original topic," says Lady Stamer with a frown, "I consider Evelyn D'Arcy a very lucky girl."

"I don't," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes promptly.

"Well, of course not. You have such peculiar views."

"Have I? How you've studied me. You are nearly as good a friend as Mr. Wylding-Weekes. *He* tells me of all my little peccadilloes. He is *full* of information about them. He is a perfect treasure," says Mr. Wylding-Weekes's wife with a radiant smile. "He is a regular almanac so far as my sins go. He can give you day and date for every one of them. So can you, it seems."

"I assure you, you credit me too far. Mr. Wylding-Weekes may naturally feel an anxiety about you—but so far as *I* am concerned—— But we were talking about Evelyn D'Arcy, were we not? and her approaching marriage. You have led me very far afield, but to begin at the begin-

ning I will at once say that I do not see how she could have done better."

"I do," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes promptly. "A lot better. For example, there is——"

"*Just a moment!*" says Lady Stamer rising abruptly but gracefully, and hurrying across the grass to somebody who undoubtedly has not sent her so much as a glance of invitation.

"Sold!" says Mr. Blount, looking at Mrs. Wylding-Weekes.

"Is that how you look at it?" says she. "*Io triumphe,*" would be my cry."

"Well, I hardly know," says Mrs. Vaudrey hesitating. She has just come up, and has heard something of the discussion, and is divided between her longing to agree with anybody against Lady Stamer and her desire to befriend Mr. Crawford, of whom she is a thorough partizan. There is a third battle in her mind that would at a pinch upset all the others. Evelyn—if *she* were to be made unhappy—every one else might go to the wall first. Upon this matter even she and her Reginald are of accord.

"Pouf!" says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. "Don't you think Eaton Stamer would be a more desirable companion for even a part of one's life than that old fossil up here?"

"But if Eaton doesn't care for her—and if Mr. Crawford (you shouldn't call him a fossil, my dear! there are older men than he)—and if our good host of to-day is in love with her, and she with him——"

"If! Rubbish," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. "Oh, here is Lady Stamer back again. We're still at it, Lady Stamer. Still discussing the rights and wrongs of this marriage that I call iniquitous. See what it is to be stranded in a small country place with only one idea between the lot of us. We are now wondering why on earth Evelyn has not chosen a young man—instead of Mr. Crawford."

"Very few young men have anything to recommend them, whereas Mr. Crawford——"

"Has made his pile! I know all that. But money isn't everything. That's what the good folks say, and you're a good folk, aren't you, Lady Stamer?"

"I don't profess to be clever enough to understand slang," says Lady Stamer. "But I hope I do my duty at all times."

"Ah, you see, you *do* understand," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes with an irreverent laugh. "Well, but if money *isn't* everything, why should we congratulate Evelyn on this engagement?"

"Because Mr. Crawford is a most desirable *parti*. He is honourable, charitable—a good man in every respect. I'm sure I can't imagine what he sees in her," with pious malignity. "But as it is, I should think she ought to be proud to know herself his wife. What, after all, could a *young* man have to offer her in comparison?"

"His hair, and a tooth or two," says Mr. Blount mildly.

"Nonsense! Don't be absurd, Bartholomew," says Lady Stamer angrily. The apocryphal young man has now become Eaton Stamer to all present, and is as distinctly on the *tapis* as if his name had been mentioned. "Has Mr. Crawford no hair—no teeth? Pray be reasonable—if you can."

"I was wrong!" says Mr. Blount, still very mild. "His hair is all his own, so—let us hope—are his teeth. "But the 'young man' might have hair too? *May* he have hair?" with an imploring glance. "And it might be brown instead of white."

"Mr. Crawford's hair is not white. It is barely grey. A most becoming colour I always think."

"So do I—and so suggestive," says Mrs. Coventry, with her ill-natured smile. "Silver shade, isn't it? Miss D'Arcy evidently admires it too."

"I think any one who would seek to upset such a marriage as this," says Lady Stamer with a fell glance at Mr. Blount, who receives it with an amiable grin, "might honestly be regarded as Miss D'Arcy's worst enemy. It is a chance that she will never get again. And if it so happens that he *is* a little older than her, what does that matter?"

"Nothing—nothing!" says Mr. Blount airily. "A century or two, what is it after all? There are many delightful old people about the world. Santa Klaus and old Father Christmas, for example. Evelyn has loved them in imagination from her youth up. Why should she not love one of 'em in reality now?"

Mrs. Coventry laughs.

"You are a little severe on Mr. Crawford, don't you think?" says she.

"Not a bit. He's as old as Father Abraham," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, "whilst Evelyn is a baby."

"Oh, a very clever baby, surely!" says Lady Stamer, with a sneer.

"You aren't much of a judge of character if you think *her* mercenary," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. "She's got about as much idea of hooking any one as the child unborn."

"Eh?" says Lady Stamer, raising her glasses to survey her pretty opponent with the proper amount of scorn necessary to the occasion. "You mean——? You really speak such a very remarkable language that—er——"

"I'll translate it if you like," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, with the utmost amiability. "What I mean is, that if Evelyn had a grain of the common sense that *ought* to belong to all girls in these days when matrons think they can ride rough-shod over them, she would have landed that young man of whom Batty has been speaking, long before this. See? Shall I now translate to you the young man?"

"No, thanks," says Lady Stamer hastily, and with a glance that would have killed her, if there was death in any glance.

Mrs. Wylding-Weekes laughs gaily—a little maliciously perhaps—rises, beckons to both her cavaliers, and having made Mr. Blount a present of a small grimace, sails away towards the other end of the lawn.

"How society can tolerate that young woman," says Lady Stamer wrathfully, as the young woman fades from view round a corner, "has been to me a moral puzzle for some time past."

"She is amusing. Society forgives a good deal to the people who are good enough to afford them a laugh now and then. It is an age barren of laughter," says Mrs. Coventry.

"Her support of Evelyn D'Arcy is hardly one to be desired," says Lady Stamer. "'Birds of a feather,' is an old adage and a true one. This sudden friendship of hers for that wild little girl, who, I am told, does nothing but train horses from morning till night, argues badly for the latter."

"Yes? But how?"

"Well. *Arcades ambo*, you know."

"Oh, my dear Lady Stamer!"

"You need not take the ordinary slang interpretation. But really I can hardly imagine that Mrs. Wylding-Weekes can mean good to Evelyn D'Arcy."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps she desires to lead Mr. Crawford into her own net, and so would prevent his marriage with Miss D'Arcy."

"You said 'Oh' to me just now. Surely I have stronger grounds for saying 'Oh' to you now. That is a very condemnatory suggestion of yours about Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. However, the real point of discussion is Mr. Crawford's infatuation for that girl. It is the luckiest thing that could have happened to her. Although scarcely a friend of hers—you know I do not altogether approve of her—still I should be glad to see her well married."

"I can quite understand. She would be out of the way," says Mrs. Coventry with calm impertinence. "She is very pretty. I don't know her well, but it has often occurred to me, that people—young men, you know—might find her attractive."

"They do," says Mr. Blount, with feeling.

"You are not *the* young man in question, are you?" asks Mrs. Coventry, laughing. It gives her a sort of pleasure to hanker round the one subject that gives Lady Stamer acute anxiety.

"No, but one of them," says Mr. Blount. "You must not think she is reduced to a miserable unit."

"Young men as a rule haven't got a penny," says Lady Stamer. "They are totally impecunious. If Bartholomew were, as you suggest, a suitor for Miss D'Arcy's hand—which I am glad to be able to declare he is not—what *could* he offer her?"

"Nothing," says Mr. Blount mournfully. "Neither money nor position. Not"—thoughtfully—"not even a wrinkle. Yes, yes, you can see for yourself, Mrs. Coventry, that Crawford has very greatly the pull over me."

"You have proved your case," says she. "But are you sure you aren't the real and original young man whom you yourself introduced. You speak with so much feeling that one almost—— No, you need not speak. Of course, we all know that the really clever thing is to tell as few lies as one can manage; why should I throw you off the line?"

"You couldn't," says he. "If that 'young man' of whom you speak exists, it is *not* me, worse luck."

"Ah!" she turns her bright but malicious eyes on Lady Stamer. "Perhaps you can tell me?" says she.

"The last person in the world," says Lady Stamer coldly. "I know no more of Miss D'Arcy and her love affairs than you do."

"That is nothing."

"Well, why pre-suppose any love affair, save this with Mr. Crawford? If he is found willing to give himself away to an unformed creature like that, why should not she be found not only willing, but thankful, to give herself to him?"

"Why not? indeed," says Mr. Blount. "Ah! Here comes the bride-elect."

CHAPTER XL.

"You don't find it too cold?" says Mr. Crawford, who has come up to them with Evelyn.

"Not in this sheltered spot," says Lady Stamer. "And what a mild day it is. You are going on? Dear Evelyn! so pleased to see you." With a little smile and hand pressure that might have done duty for a life-long friendship. Evelyn, turning large inquiring eyes on her, drops her hand languidly.

"Yes, to the waterfall. Miss D'Arcy has never yet seen it in all its magnificence. But last week's rains have swollen it to a quite tremendous beauty. Will you," with reluctant politeness, "come with us?"

"Not just yet," says Lady Stamer, who has been daunted by Evelyn's direct stare. "Mrs. Coventry and I have promised ourselves a look at it by-and-by."

"Oh! have we? I didn't know," says Mrs. Coventry, who is nothing if not disagreeable.

Her words fall only on the ears of Lady Stamer, however, the other two having passed out of sight, Evelyn pale, but with her lovely face full of light and full too of a sweet determination to be *good* to Mr. Crawford.

On and over the wooden bridge they go, with the river rushing beneath their feet and the roar of the distant cataract within their ears.

Evelyn pausing at the end of the bridge, leans her arms upon the wooden parapet and gazes down into the stream, that here runs calmly, if swiftly. Through the clear water the brown stones shine, and every now and then a darting thing flashes from bank to bank.

"How bright it is, how calm, how *clean*; quite like a lovely life," says Mr. Crawford in a low tone. "One can see right into it. There is nothing hidden. Down in the

very depths of it there are only polished stones, that shine like jewels; all is purity, peace——” A heavy sigh stays his words.

“A charming simile,” says she softly. “See—see too, how it hastens to its glad eternity—the ocean. And how it helps and waters and gives life to the pretty weeds as it goes. Like the pure life again it makes haste to redeem its time, so as at last to gain its heaven.”

“To gain heaven! Either in this life or the next, how few find that.”

“Oh! not so few perhaps.”

“Who can say? If heaven is so attainable as you believe, who would care to linger here?”

“How sadly you speak,” says the girl, turning her eyes to his. “Is life without charm to you? Do you indeed long for death?”

“Oh! no, no, *no*!” exclaims he sharply. A shudder runs through him. He makes an effort to recover himself and fling off the fit of depression that has been troubling him all the morning.

“Life must be sweet to me,” says he with a tender smile. “Has it not given me you?”

“Ah! you seemed to be forgetting that just now,” says she, with a glance so full of a pretty coquetry that it sets all his pulses leaping. In time—in time, she may learn to love him; and his heaven will be gained in this world, if it be denied him in the next.

For the moment trouble dies away from him. A blessed forgetfulness steeps all his soul in peace. The dull winter day becomes glorious summer and a wonderful silence falls upon the land—a land that holds but two people; him and her. It seems to him as though here in the very midst of stirring life a long pause has come. Is the world *really* moving? Is there a world at all? Or is this a new dreamy ecstatic state in which thought and memory are mercifully impossible, and only bliss perfected, holds sway?

“What is that?” says Evelyn suddenly, who has gone on a little in front, lost in thoughts of her own. A small little brown thing has run out from the bank of the river almost at her feet, and is making a rush for the shelter of some stones farther off. A shrill bark from the terrier that is following close at Mr. Crawford’s heels, tells them what it is. The rat seeing her natural enemy, throws her heart

into her race. Terror lends her wings, but too late; the terrier, an implacable wire-haired creature, has seen her, and makes a forward dash.

"Oh! stop him; *don't* let him kill it," cries Evelyn in a voice of agony. The thought that she may see the rat mangled before her eyes, causes her a sick sensation; the training of her youth has made her almost as active as the dog himself, and by a quick effort, she flings herself on her knees before him, and catches his struggling little body in her hands.

Maddened by his disappointment and furious at the loss of his prey, the dog with a shrill yelp turns upon Evelyn, and meeting his vicious little white teeth in the sleeve of her coat, tears savagely at it, uttering fierce growls the while. It takes only a second to reach the flesh within, and as his teeth pinch her, a sharp cry breaks from Evelyn.

"Ah!" says she. There is time for no more. Crawford's fingers have closed like a vice upon the dog's neck, forcing the animal to open its jaws. Dragging him from Evelyn's arm, he holds him with a violent strength for a moment or two, shaking him backwards and forwards, and then with a fierce imprecation flings him from him into a bunch of withered bracken close by.

"You are not hurt?" cries he, turning his livid face to Evelyn—the eyes glowing, the nostrils dilated and white. "He has not torn you?"

"No—no, it is nothing, nothing. But *the dog!*" exclaims Evelyn in a panting whisper. She shudders convulsively, and shrinks away from him, pointing in a terrified manner to the spot on which the body of the dog is lying. Even as she looks, a last faint quiver runs through the little form that but just this moment was so full of angry life—and now it succumbs to death. "You have killed him!" says she trembling. As she says it she bursts into tears.

"Killed him," repeats Crawford, in a low but awful voice. If pale before, he looks ghastly now, and an expression creeps into his eyes that makes Evelyn feel faint and cold.

"Dead! *dead!*" says he, in a dull way, his gaze fastened on the body of the dog. "*How* did it happen—was it I? . . . In one moment! one little moment! So old, but yet so full of life—and in *one* short moment! I," vehemently, "I never meant it. I swear it. But the blood—who can wipe out the blood——?"

His manner has grown wild and strange. Almost it seems to Evelyn that he is wandering. The girl, filled with a great compassion for him, goes nearer and lays her hand upon his arm. The tears still stand thickly in her eyes, and one or two are running down her cheeks.

"Don't be so unhappy about it," says she, with earnest entreaty. "You did not mean it—of *course* you did not mean it. And that poor little creature—he——" she breaks down here in her small attempt to comfort him. "Oh, I am *sorry* you killed him, I am sorry," cries she passionately. "And it was all my fault—it was to save me you did it."

"I was not accountable," says Mr. Crawford, still in that strange forced way, as though he were pleading his case before a bar of justice—an unkindly bar. "I knew nothing until it was all over—a *whole day afterwards!* The first time I knew of it was when——" He stops suddenly and looks down at her in a dazed way, but yet with suspicion in his eyes.

"You don't know what you are saying," says she gently. She is frightened by his manner, but nevertheless brave in her determination to help him. "You are taking this too much to heart."

"True! true! I am taking it too much to heart," repeats he with a heavy sigh.

"Forget it—think of me," whispers she, subduing heroically a strong inclination to cry, and compelling herself to think only of him. "See now," smiling tremulously, "I am of some *small* importance in your sight—am I not? When I tell you I am tired—that I would like to go back to the house—to the others——"

"Yes; come." He turns away, following her command but showing her none of the fond observances that have up to this encompassed her as with a cloud. He walks away in the direction of the house, obeying her words, but as if forgetful of the fact that she is with him.

"But the dog. You will not leave him? He must be buried," says Evelyn falteringly, whose affection for all dumb animals is part of her life. She has grown up with them—nursed, reared and buried many of them—and has a fondness for them that no time will ever obliterate.

"*Was* he buried?" says Mr. Crawford, looking back at her over his shoulder. "I never heard. Not deep, I think." There is a weird suggestion in his glance, and then, all at

once, "Ah!" cries he. It is indeed with a sharp cry that he recovers himself. The veil that has fallen on his mind is now lifted, and once more he is himself.

"I will see to it—to the dog," says he. "Come home now. You look frightened, tired. Evelyn! you have been crying!"

He stops short. This sudden revelation of the fact that he has up to this been blind to her emotion, disturbs Evelyn more than all that has gone before.

"You did not know?" says she gravely.

"I was too much upset, too much annoyed with myself," returns he. "You must forgive me that, if you can. But to kill a dog like that, unknowingly, would disturb most men, I fancy. Besides, the fear that he had seriously hurt you distracted me at first. My fears were groundless? There was only the alarm?"

"Only that," says she, preferring somehow to keep secret the knowledge of that wounded spot upon her arm. Surely, surely that poor little brute had had too terrible a punishment already. Why add to his great misfortune angry thoughts?

"Well, come now. I'll send a man to see about his burial," says Crawford. He takes Evelyn's hand and leads her forward through the dry wintry ferns and grasses for a yard or so, then, as though some inner spirit is tormenting him, he turns to her and looks with a terrible appeal into her eyes.

"Evelyn! Evelyn! Have pity on me! Do not despise, do not fear me! You are my one, *one* hope; do not fail me."

"I shall not fail you," says she with lovely kindness. "You may trust me for ever."

"You are my life, *my all*," says he with deep agitation. "Do you *know* that? I am a silent man, I say little; but if all the feeling of all the world could be poured into one stream, it could not be stronger than the love I bear to you."

He does not attempt to caress her as he speaks. He stands indeed rather back from her, with one of her hands clasped closely between both of his.

"I am glad you love me," says she very sadly. Alas! alas! for that other love that *might* have been!

"And in spite of all—of everything—you will still trust

me? You will give yourself to me? You do not shrink from me?" asks he, lifting her hand and pressing it feverishly against his lips. "Oh, Evelyn, do not forsake me."

"Have I not promised you?" says she reproachfully. "Is my word so light a thing?"

"But to chain a bright life such as yours to one so altogether unhappy——"

"Are you unhappy? I have often thought it," says she gently. "And I have thought, too, that if I can help you to think less about your trouble, I may be of some small use to you. But," she pauses nervously, and then looks straight at him, "why are you unhappy?"

"I might deceive you," says he quietly, after a full minute has gone by, "but I prefer not to do so. I confess honestly that there is one past trouble in my life that is always remembered by me—and with sore distress. A trouble that I believe will never be forgotten by me. I cannot tell you what it is. I cannot confide it to you or any living being. If it daunts you now, Evelyn, say so."

"But that is so vague," says she faintly.

"It must always be vague. It is my own trouble. It has nothing to do with any living man or woman. It has nothing to do with any woman, living or dead. It shall have nothing to do with my love, my *adoration* of you—with my determination to lay my life, such as it is, at your feet, to make a football of it, if you will."

"I shall not do that," says she.

"No; you are not of that sort. But still I resign myself absolutely to your will; it is all I can do."

"Why do you not say that you have money—that you can shower *that* upon me?" says she, with a little burst of feeling.

"Because you are you! Don't I know how little weight sheer dross would have with you? Don't I know, too, that you are willing to marry me without love because it will be for the good of your uncle, and——"

"He does not know that," interrupts she quickly; "be careful that he never does. And after all, is not that marrying you for the love of money?"

Her tone has grown very sorrowful.

"No. To desire money for oneself, and to desire it for another, are two different phases of feeling. One is sordid, the other is noble. I fear—I *fear*," says he, "so strong

is my love for you, that I should accept your sacrifice of yourself, even though I knew the first feeling to be really yours. As it is——"

"Yes?" with grave question.

"Do not ask me to lay bare my heart," says he in a low tone. "It is too full—of you!"

"Oh, do not think too much of me," says the girl, her own heart aching. "You will only be disappointed; you give so much, I am giving so little. It—it troubles me that you should love me so greatly."

"Let nothing trouble you. Think always that I consider myself blessed above measure in that you have consented to give me your friendship and to let me give you my love."

"A poor bargain," with a faint smile.

"A rich one, I think. Ah! here are the others. Would you rather not see them?" turning anxiously to her. "Would you rather go into the house? You have been distressed. I will explain."

"No;" she shakes her head; a little nervous smile parts her lips; "there are gossips in these days," says she. "We will give them no occasion of falling foul of us. If I left you now in full view of them, they might say I had learned something to your disadvantage during our walk. You see?"

"I see," says he, his eyes on the ground.

Slowly they advance towards the group assembled under the southern wall of the beautiful old house.

CHAPTER XLI.

It is a very picturesque group. The day, although dull, is not cold, and the women, sitting here and there, or walking up and down the terraces in their furs and laces, with here and there a touch of crimson to relieve the darkness of their costumes, make a charming picture against the glistening background of the trailing ivy, that everlasting garment of old winter. Here cut close against the walls, and there hanging in all its native luxuriance from the towers and battlements, it seems ever bent on clothing the chilly old king in a verdure green as summer hath it, in spite of the frosts and snows.

Mrs. Wylding-Weekes has been playing her eternal banjo, and singing to it apparently, though only the ceaseless, monotonous sound of its tum-tum-tum comes to Evelyn and Mr. Crawford as they draw near.

Evidently it has been an Anglo-negro melody of the very latest fashion, and probably of a very pronounced type, as quite a burst of applause breaks from the male court that, as usual, has formed itself round Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, as it comes to a termination. She herself seems to be dying with laughter, whilst afar off, in the shade of a gum tree, Mr. Wylding-Weekes may be seen aglow with wrath subdued.

"Give you another?" asks Mrs. Wylding-Weekes gaily, with a disgracefully ill-concealed glance towards her husband and a nudge to Batty Blount. "*Bonâ fide* this time! No nonsense about it! Straight from Kentuck. The real article—warranted to wear and to wash. Who's for it? *Say!*"

A dozen hands go up at once, all with the manly shirt-cuff at the end of them. Whereupon she gives them, with immense spirit, a truly terrible ditty that has a good deal to do with the wily opossum.

"An opossum up a gum tree,
Up he go,
Up he go."

It is unpardonable. The allusion to the gum tree over there, with Mr. Wylding-Weekes not exactly up it, but distinctly raging beneath it, is only too apparent.

"I really wish she *wouldn't*," says Evelyn nervously, in a low aside to Mr. Crawford, who is looking distressed. Every one is wishing that, except the reckless few; but all the wishing is of no avail.

"It is a pity," says Mr. Crawford gravely.

To Evelyn it seems that it is almost more than that; but she is in a specially depressed mood in which all unpleasant things take alarmingly huge proportions.

The killing of that dog is still fresh to her. The scene refuses to be laid, and repeats itself over and over before her imagination. And Mr. Crawford's face! That cruel light in his eyes as he had held the poor little brute. With what an awful tenacity he had held—and *choked it!*

And that he—*he* should have been the hero of this sorry

affair. That is the real mystery that troubles her. Other men in their wrath might have done it, but that he should have done it disturbs her. Was there ever man so kind, so calm, so gentle almost to melancholy? Yet his rage had been strange, horrible. And the regret—that came too late—surely that had been as strange, as exaggerated as the rage itself.

How was it with him? What curious nature had she lit upon thus early in her young journey through life? Always she can see before her those fierce eyes and the fiercer clutch of the fingers round the dog's throat; and as she thinks of it, she shrinks afresh from him with a strong repugnance.

To blame herself a moment later! For with the fear of him there is always present with her a pity for him, a pity that is divine.

"What a delicious old place this is, Mr. Crawford," says Marian Vandeleur, with a view to getting rid of Mrs. Wylding-Weekes and her outrageous conduct.

"Yes, isn't it?" says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes promptly, who has always something to say about every topic under the sun. "Just like the old barracks one reads of. That thing of Tennyson's, don't you know, eh? The Moated Grange—what?"

"An excellent name. A most appropriate one," says Crawford courteously, in that slow way of his, his eyes on the ground. He smiles as he speaks, but to his heart he shows a different face. She had hit upon a truth, this silly woman. Despair lay there, in that old moated grange of poetry; despair lies *here*!

"I hardly think so," says Miss Vandeleur gently; "very inappropriate surely. It is a sunny old place, with no suspicion of that ideal gloom about it, to which Mrs. Wylding-Weekes alludes."

"Things are not always on the surface," says Crawford lightly, yet toying, as he always will, with the remorseful melancholy at his heart. "For all we may know, in this more real spot a soul may lie panting for liberty."

"How ungallant," cries Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, with her shrill cackle and her usual delicacy; "'pon my word, for a freshly-engaged man, *that* isn't bad. Panting so *soon* for liberty. Evelyn; are you going to stand that?"

"One must envy you your imagination; it is very

lively," says Mr. Crawford with exquisite sweetness. There is not the smallest tinge of either embarrassment or resentment in his tone. "But indeed I was but calling on my own imagination, when I supposed there might be a discontented spirit in this grange. So you see I have a little of that charm, of which just now I was envious."

"Oh! that's all very fine," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders. "But I half think you meant it. I've studied you, you know, and I believe you dearly love to pose—to show yourself off—as a social martyr, without exactly going into the reason of it."

"Have you seen the winter-houses? They are charming," says Sir Bertram Stamer at this moment, addressing Mrs. Wylding-Weekes with *empressement*. "No? May I accompany you?"

"You mean that I am not behaving myself properly and that I ought to be removed," replies that indiscreet matron, without hesitation. "Well, lead on. I'm not often favoured by an attention from you. I feel I have been putting my foot in it in earnest, when *you* come to the rescue. Mr. Crawford"—looking back at him with a beaming smile—"if I've sinned forgive me, and don't let any one take away my character whilst I'm absent."

"You can't take away what you can't lay hold of," says Mrs. Coventry, with a little sarcastic glance at Lady Stamer.

"A most improper person," says Lady Stamer severely. "When is she to be dropped? that is what I want to know."

"Never! She is the ingredient that makes the social pudding eatable. *You* would condemn her to penal servitude for life. *I* should present her with a gold medal."

"But why?" asks Mrs. Vaudrey, who has come up, and who is looking very cold in a thin dolman that had done duty all last summer. She is puzzled, and divided in opinion between her longing to denounce Mrs. Wylding-Weekes for her late suggestion that Crawford could be unhappy (when engaged to such a dear girl as Evelyn), and the sneaking affection she entertains for that most impossible if kind-hearted coquette.

"Have I not said it? Because she is the salt that savours our dull corner of the earth; the naughty glass of brandy that flavours our pudding, but to which all virtuous people close their eyes; the little touch of leaven that makes our barm rise."

"Or our venoms," says Mrs. Vaudrey, quite neatly for her.

"How animated you all look," says Mr. Crawford, approaching them at this moment. "So more than kind of you on this colourless day. Madame Iscar is going to sing now, I think" (a fresh celebrity he has got down from London to assist them in getting rid of their day). "Don't hurry; but in a minute or two, if any of you care for singing, I think she will please you."

"We all adore it," says Lady Stamer, who is specially gracious to him on every occasion, not to say grateful. Has he not taken a worry off her mind, and left an unwise son without the means of continuing on in his folly?

"Yet to leave this charming view is indeed a compliment to Madame Iscar," says Miss Vandeleur. "What pleasure can lie even in an ordinary winter day. No snow, no ice; a heavy sky; leafless trees, if one gets beyond the shrubberies, and in spite of all that there is a nameless charm that holds me out of doors when I feel I ought to be within. You feel it, Evelyn?"

Miss D'Arcy has been so singularly silent, that her friend's heart grows afraid for her. And what are those dark circles under her eyes? Has she been crying? Does crying mean regret? And if so, what of this news that bears upon to-morrow? Has Evelyn heard it yet?

"I like winter," says Evelyn impassively, "and I like this place. How quiet it is. Like death!"

"Oh, no!" says Miss Vandeleur, a good deal shocked. "The prettiest place! Like a calm life rather."

"Like death, I think," with a gentle persistency. Mr. Crawford has moved away and is talking to Mrs. Vaudrey, but now he is coming back to the girls again over the short shaven grass. He has compelled himself to be undemonstrative, but to stay away from Evelyn for long is impossible to him.

"It has the quiet of death surely," says Evelyn, "and all its other charms." Then with a soft glance at her friend, "There is no place for memory here."

"We were talking about this place. It pleases Evelyn," says Miss Vandeleur, as Crawford joins them. Her own heart revolts against this marriage; but if it is to be—if Evelyn has made up her mind to it—surely it is a friend's part to make the thorny path less thorny for her.

"It does," says Evelyn, looking kindly up at him. "The very walls awake my admiration. How clothed they are, how rich with growing things. They in themselves are a beauty."

"I am glad you like them; I confess that I myself hold them in great respect," says Mr. Crawford, giving Evelyn a swift full glance, that though brief is so replete with passionate life and love that Marian's heart dies within her. "Walls are like children," goes on Mr. Crawford, in his calm, thoughtful way. "When first born they are naked, and then come the kindly mosses and grasses, covering them day by day, year by year, until in their old age they are altogether decent, clothed with an excellent garment of green, and grey lichens, and with the ivy that covers so many multitudes of sins."

"Oh, the ivy; that is a true friend to nature," says Marian.

"Why? It only hides—and hides—and hides," says Evelyn petulantly.

"Well, is that not something?"

"No. Why should there be anything to hide?" more petulantly still. "Is not nature perfect?"

"But the walls are man's work, and man is not perfect."

"Then it is *man* the ivy covers," says Evelyn quickly. She turns to Crawford with a restless smile. "You hear that aspersion upon your sex?" says she. "Have you no word to defend yourself? What is it *you* would hide?"

It is a random shot, but it tells. Crawford, though outwardly unmoved, feels his courage forsake him. At this moment Mr. Blount, standing on the highest step of the balcony that leads into the reception rooms, calls aloud to them. It is a departure for Mr. Blount, who, as an unvarying rule, always turns up when he is *not* wanted. Just now he is a haven of refuge to Crawford.

"I say, good people, she's going to begin," roars he genially, alluding presumably to the prima donna within. "Aren't you going to patronize her? She's looking very black, Crawford. It's my opinion she expects you to see her through, eh?"

"We're coming," says Mr. Crawford equably.

CHAPTER XLII.

MADAME ISCAR has excelled herself, has received with a fat graciousness all the smiles and pretty words showered upon her, has even been good enough to make them a present of a song not in the agreement, has expressed herself charmed with the Grange and its master and his friends, and abstains from even a single yawn until the carriage doors have closed upon her and she is safely started up the avenue on her way to the 4.30 train that will carry her back to her beloved London and far from these estimable but intolerable country folk, who are just now congratulating themselves secretly, if not openly, on their good manners and the kindly fashion in which they have consented *for once* to receive a public singer as though she had been one of themselves. "Quite a common person—no family—not at all in *our* set; a person, you know, who—well *really*——"

No doubt—they whisper confidentially, with a glow of generosity at their hearts—she must have been greatly flattered by her reception. They had not made the *slightest* difference with her; had sat quite close to her several times. And one of them had given her a rose. She had been *so* pleased, poor thing; had said quite lovely things about it. Of course it was a day she would never forget—this mingling on terms of equality with the County.

Poor County!

Now that she has at last been compelled to "*tear* herself away" (that is how they look at it), they rise themselves, and draw into little groups and order their carriages.

Evelyn happens to form one of them, with Mrs. Coventry, two or three other people in the neighbourhood, Marian, and Mrs. Vaudrey. Mr. Blount is hovering on its outskirts, conducting a most able skirmish with one of the D'Arcy children.

"We must be going, really. It is awfully late!" says an ethereal looking young woman, who is beginning to love the thought of her dinner—generally a hearty one—and to hate the thought of the long drive that lies between her and it.

"Yes. The carriages are ordered. You won't have to be hungry *much* longer," says Mrs. Coventry, who knows everything about everybody, and is generally nasty all round.

"I'm never hungry," says the ethereal young woman, with a wondering stare from her large sad eyes.

"Well, my dear, then you shouldn't *look* it," says Mrs. Coventry, tapping her playfully with her fan. "Eat up—eat up all you can lay your hands on, and perhaps Providence will be good to you and remove the signs of emaciation that are at present disfiguring you."

As emaciation is the one thing on which the ethereal one prides herself, she naturally receives this with resentment.

"I am as Heaven made me," says she with deep solemnity.

"Or Mother Nature," suggests Mrs. Coventry, unabashed.

"One should always fix one's eyes upon the highest points," says the thin young woman ecstatically.

"That's what *I* think," says Mr. Blount, who—having reduced the youngest D'Arcy child to tears, and having restored him to tranquillity by half-a-crown—is now as gay as a lark. "Fix your weather eye on the top of Mont Blanc, for example—from a convenient site—keeping your head up all the time, and there you are, you know! You've felt you've done it, after half an hour's hard gazing. You've got through the slips, the stumbles—the hairbreadth escapes—the ail but certain death, and yet you're safe in wind and limb at the end of it. Idiots go up and get killed. *You* don't, and——"

"No, *you* don't," says Mrs. Coventry drily.

Miss Vandeleur laughs a little.

"I'm afraid for once you are at fault, Mrs. Coventry," says she. "As it is so rare an occasion," with irrepressible maliciousness, "you may forgive it. Mr. Blount is an accomplished Alpine climber."

"Now, my dear Marian, no taradiddles," says Mr. Blount severely. "I am entirely against that kind of thing. Stick to the moral path, the *safe* path—in this case, odd to say, the lowest one—and you'll certainly have your reward. The *im*-moral path—odd again—is the one that leads upwards in this instance. It has been censured many a time, and very justly. Suicide has been put down by law. I entirely agree with Mrs. Marjoribanks," with a glance at the ethereal young woman. "Keep your *eye* upon the highest point by all means, but keep your foot off it."

"How frivolous you are," Mrs. Marjoribanks, very ungratefully it must be acknowledged.

Mrs. Coventry, annoyed by her late mistake, and feeling therefore venomous, looks round her with a view to hurting somebody. Her small eyes fall on Evelyn, who is looking a little pale and tired. Does she know? Has she heard? At all events it will be amusing to see how she will take it.

"How delightfully that woman Iscar sang," says she. "A pity Captain Stamer missed her. He is to be home to-morrow I hear. A day earlier and he would have been here."

She is looking straight at Evelyn, so directly, indeed, as almost to invite the regard of the others to the girl, who is standing looking back at her, a strange shocked look upon her face. It is momentary, however. Nobody but the malicious speaker has seen it, though Marian has somehow felt it, and so has Mr. Blount, who is a strange mixture of sense and nonsense, but who, through all, carries the kindest heart.

"I expect he has heard her a hundred times," says he. "She's just returned from a tour in Ireland. Dublin raved about her; and Stamer likes music. There's the colonel calling you, Evelyn. Oh! he's just gone past the window now. Come; I'll take you to him."

He hurries the girl away, without giving her time to demur, down the long room into the open air and to the spot indicated where the colonel had certainly *not* been.

"Hah!" says Mrs. Coventry. "There is more in Mr. Blount than one would imagine from his exceedingly vacuous countenance and inane conversation. I'm afraid my unfortunate remark about Captain Stamer's sudden return upset Miss Vandeleur."

"Why should it?" says Marian, regarding her with intense and cold disdain. She had heard of Eaton's home-coming an hour ago, and has been lost in miserable uncertainty as to how best to make it known to Evelyn. To have had it thus sprung upon her, and intentionally, is intolerable.

"Don't you think she was a little *épris* there? And perhaps he a little too—Lady Stamer is anything but overjoyed at his unexpected home-coming," she laughs with thorough enjoyment. "I fancy this engagement with our good host is hardly to Miss D'Arcy's entire liking."

"And imagining all this, you still sped your shaft," says Miss Vandeleur with a contempt so unrestrained that the other in spite of herself colours hotly.

"I merely mentioned a passing fact. I do not feel myself called upon to regulate my conversation according to the fancies of my associates," says she with ill-suppressed annoyance.

"There is such a thing as delicacy!" says Miss Vandeleur with a touch of passionate reproach. A second later she knows she has gone too far, but for once in her gentle life she hardly regrets it.

"And you?" says Mrs. Coventry. "Do you always remember? My dear girl, let me entreat you to give up posing. It never tells. Tack on to it another letter and it becomes prosing. Bores are the pariahs of society. Don't classify yourself with them, I implore you—for your own sake, merely."

"You are very good," says Marian calmly.

"As for Miss D'Arcy, if I insinuated that she is not altogether madly in love with her *fiancé*—was it so great a crime?"

"That was not the crime."

"Did she never then give a thought to Eaton Stamer?"

"Oh! not at all—not at all," cries Mrs. Vaudrey, kind, but blind soul, striking into the discussion with great energy. "Never anything but friends, you know. Friends all their lives. Grew up together almost. And we all know that such early friendships rarely ripen into love affairs. It's a well-known thing, isn't it, Marian?"

"Yes," says Marian sturdily, though her heart is bleeding for her friend.

"I think there is nothing so sweet as that old lore," says Mrs. Coventry with an affectation of admiration that enrages Marian.—"That firm belief in the undeviating lines here and there that are supposed to move the world. I wish I had not outlived them; but I'm too old now, I'm afraid, to correct my follies. How lovely it is to be always young," with a smile at poor Mrs. Vaudrey who is looking anything but juvenile in her faded bonnet and worn gown; "to be able to cling to the traditions of one's youth as you can."

"I'm clinging to nothing," says Mrs. Vaudrey stoutly. "I'm only saying that I don't believe Evelyn ever cared for Eaton Stamer in the way you think she did."

"Ah," says Mrs. Coventry, "you are farther advanced in your opinions than Miss Vandeleur. She wavers, I think.

Do you believe, Miss Vandeleur, that boys and girls who grow up together are *always* bound to hate each other?"

"I do so dislike this sort of discussion where one's friends come in," says Miss Vandeleur with dignity. "And so I am sure does Mrs. Vaudrey. We both are very fond of Evelyn D'Arcy. And——"

"And so am I," says Mrs. Marjoribanks with promptitude and a sudden return to naturalness, stirred by that late attack on her of Mrs. Coventry's. "I think her a perfectly sweet little thing, and I think it a positive cruelty that any one should say a word against her."

"It is a crusade," says Mrs. Coventry pleasantly. "I should like to join it. *Who* has been saying anything against her. Pray let me into the secret that I too may help to annihilate them."

Nobody answers; there ensues indeed a rather awkward silence that is broken presently by a suspicion rather than by a knowledge of some disturbance going on in the hall outside.

"What can be the matter?" says Mrs. Vaudrey nervously. "Nothing on fire. Eh?"

CHAPTER XLIII.

WELL! nothing of any great importance! Mr. Wylding-Weekes *only*! But as he explodes about once a week regularly, no one gives much heed to his catherine wheels.

It is the usual thing! There has been some unpleasantness; Mr. Wylding-Weekes has discovered Mrs. Wylding-Weekes in one of the winter houses with a *man* at her feet! Kissing her hands or doing something or other distinctly unpleasant to a jealous husband. Nothing quite transpires, but that a *dénouement* has been reached is beyond question!

Mr. Wylding-Weekes is making a horrid fuss! He always does. Mrs. Wylding-Weekes is standing by doing the social martyr to perfection. He and she are now in the hall awaiting the arrival of their carriage. The "man" is out of view! very cleverly!

The unwise have crowded on to the door step with the intention of seeing the whole thing through—the wise have held themselves aloof. Some people are laughing. Some are

indignant. It is always like this with the Wylding-Weekes. And they themselves never seem to care "a little hang," as Mr. Blount puts it poetically, *what* people think of them.

There is a whisper going abroad that it was Sir Bertram who had been the delinquent on this occasion. The lazy Sir Bertram—the one so difficult to move at any time. The idea gives a zest to the entertainment—a part of the day's festivities not provided by Mr. Crawford.

Sir Bertram, it appears, had been with her—had taken her to the gardens—had made quite a point of taking her there. *There*, where nobody else had cared to venture. There is a second story afloat that drags into it a new man from the barracks at Elton. He had arrived there about a week ago, and Mrs. Wylding-Weekes liked new men.

It is a small blot on the general conviviality, and is therefore to be regretted, but people have grown so accustomed to the little ways of the Wylding-Weekes and to their eccentricities that not much attention after all is given to it. Their carriage comes round to the door. The injured husband helps his wife into it with an air of indignant dignity that sits very funnily upon his small lean person; the wife enters it, with a resigned adieu to her host and a swift sidelong glance full of suppressed merriment at some one in the crowd, and presently the Wylding-Weekes are not only out of sight, but out of mind until the next time.

"What a little fool!" says Sir Bertram marching straight up to Marian and speaking of the troublesome person who has just disappeared up the avenue beside a raging spouse. Has he heard that his name has been associated with hers?

"I quite like her, you musn't abuse her to me," says Miss Vandeleur coldly.

"Oh! so do I for the matter of that. There's more folly than harm in her; but still——"

"That is quite true. And I prefer to hear you taking her part however lamely."

"Why?" raising his brows.

"It is the more generous thing surely."

"I can't see why I'm bound to be generous to Mrs. Wylding-Weekes—*specially*. If you mean that I should defend the entire sex, all I can say is that I don't feel equal to the task."

"Then don't undertake it. Some of us do not require it."

"*You for example?*" flinging away his cigar and folding

his arms behind him. "You needn't read me a lecture on that. I know you to be not only irreproachable, but unapproachable. Now Mrs. Wylding-Weekes——"

"Is *she* approachable?" with a faint disdain.

"I really don't know. She can be civil certainly. And that's always something."

"Something! A great deal I think."

"Do you? you might practise what you preach then."

"Do you mean that I am always *uncivil*?"

"To me, yes. To others—I don't know what you are to others."

"You are unjust," says she with a slight touch of vehemence.

"Well, you're uncivil now, aren't you? And unjust into the bargain. You are accusing me of all sorts of things. Don't deny it—I can read you quite plainly."

"I was going to deny nothing. And how am I unjust? Is there nothing of which you may be accused?"

"What a leading question, and what a tremendous one. Even you, immaculate as you are, is there nothing of which you might be accused?"

"You play with the question and in so doing you give a truthful answer to it."

"You condemn me then—unheard?"

"Nonsense; I am not your judge."

"Pardon me. You have constituted yourself as such. I bow before you. I submit myself—but above all things I claim justice. Now—your indictment. Let me know of what you deem me guilty. I don't desire a *résumé* of all the vices of which you believe me guilty, but just this last particular one."

"Your vices I know nothing of—and—they are nothing to me."

"Nor my virtues either, I suppose—believing me generously to have one or two."

"I hope you have more than that."

"But hope is so deceitful. Is that what you would say?" He laughs a little. "Well, seating himself on the parapet near, that overlooks the garden. "I'll tell you the hard thought that is in your mind for me to-day. You heard Wylding-Weekes had found me flirting with his wife in one of the houses."

"Why can't you leave that silly little creature alone?"

cries she flashing round at him. "You don't care for her—you never could. She is not suited to you, or you to her, and yet——"

"I can take the trouble to kiss her hand or her foot—or—I really forget which it was."

"It is unworthy of you!" says she with some vehemence. She turns aside and pulls away the Chantilly laces at her throat as though they are stifling her.

"It might be, if I ever *had* taken that trouble. But I assure you I did not go to the gardens with Mrs. Wylding-Weekes at all. On our way there—and I offered to show the houses to her merely to oblige your friend Miss D'Arcy—we fortunately fell in with that Deptford—new man—over there, you know," pointing to where presumably the barracks in the next town lies. "And he took her off my hands. I had the mortification of seeing that she was unfeignedly glad to get rid of me. She quite fawned on Deptford with a view to throwing me over; the backseat was undoubtedly mine, so after a decent excuse or two, I beat an ignominious retreat."

A long silence.

"Well!" says he at last in an unmistakably triumphant tone. If he had hoped that he had scored one he is lamentably mistaken; Miss Vandeleur turns her face to his, but instead of contrition he is compelled to read indignation in her eyes.

"And you knew what I meant all along. And never told me. And you let me say all sorts of things to you. You let me accuse you—when you knew a word would have changed all. You wilfully put me in the wrong! Oh, it was shameful of you."

"Good heavens! Am I still the offending party? I had believed myself the injured one, and now——"

"What on earth can be keeping the carriage?" says Miss Vandeleur sweeping past him as though he is invisible.

Her mood changes when a few minutes later she meets Evelyn, who is just leaving with the colonel and Mrs. D'Arcy. A very pale Evelyn—but quite composed now, and calm and indifferent—too indifferent, thinks Marian.

"Good-bye, Evelyn." She takes the girl's hand and holds it closely. "Tell me," rather nervously—a little unsettled by Evelyn's clear steady gaze. "To-morrow—will you come to me? or shall I—would you like me to come to you?"

"Not to-morrow," says Evelyn, shaking her head with quite an every-day smile. "I am going to give myself a delightful day to-morrow. I have accepted an invitation from myself, and I must not break it. Bad manners not permissible. It is quite a royal mandate that has been sent me, I dare not disobey. I am going for a long—long—long walk into the leafless woods."

"A dreary invitation surely," with a wistful glance at her. The girl's gaiety, though well done and seemingly unforced, does not deceive her. "You will take Jimmy with you, or one of the children—or," hesitating, "me; I should like to go."

"How can I take you?" laughing. "The invitation is for myself alone; I should not presume to bring even the dearest friend I have—and that," with a little playful pressure on her arm, "is you. No; to-morrow is given away."

"Well," says Miss Vandeleur with a sigh. Some other words might have escaped her, but the determined smile on Evelyn's lips checks her. "Good-bye," says she again.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SURELY there never dawned a day so dull as this. Grey sky, brown earth and naked trees. No stir of life anywhere.

Evelyn going for that "long, long, long walk" to which she is self-invited, and to which she hurries lest any small duty amongst the daily round of them may arise and call on her to remain at home, finds herself at about noontide entering the dark woods of Grange.

There is no fear that she will meet its master here; no fear that she will meet—anybody. It is the most secluded, the least cared for part that she has chosen, in which to while away this most hateful of all days. She had been, if quiet, entirely cheerful all the morning, and no one had guessed at the perfect frenzy of impatience that was hers, until the gate of Firgrove had closed behind her, and she found herself comparatively lost in the dim recesses of the solitary wood.

It is a melancholy spot at the best of times, this corner

'of Grange; even in the hot and glowing summer, shadows linger here; no bursts of sunlight darting through the heavy trees make golden patches on the sward beneath: a sodden sward, where vegetation grows but slowly, and always with a dying life in it. To-day it is inexpressibly dreary; deserted—lonely—hopeless—in very unison with her own thoughts and fancies.

“Here weep the dews and winds of winter blow;
The soft breeze rustles in the bending grass;
The cold rain falls here, and the drifting snow—
But tears fall not, nor lovers' footsteps pass.”

Somewhere in the distance the mad and mournful roar of the cataract may be heard, swollen by last week's rains. Its noisy tumult seems to Evelyn full of angry pain, full of despairing passion, full of revolt.

The river down below is swollen too, and now runs flush with its banks. It runs with her thoughts, she tells herself, standing on a high knoll and gazing down on it with large sad eyes. *How* it rushes! with what an eager hurry, as if to get rid of itself and fling itself for all time into its ocean of eternity! Oh! that she too might so swiftly and so easily gain the end of all things—that death from which so many shrink, and which after all is the kindest friend we have.

How cold the river looks! How full of purpose. In what a mad haste to leave its past behind it. Has it so hated then its shallows farther up, and the wide delicate reaches, where the rushes show their brown heads above the water, close to the bank. How calm a life it must have had all through the smiling summer; so calm that now, when winter is upon it, and cruel rains and drifting snows have descended on it, and proved too much for it, it has risen in protest, and gathering together all its strength, has given up hope, and seeks oblivion only in the wide sea beyond that bar.

Poor river! Its troubles have been too much for it! It seems to have lost all control over itself. And how dark, how deep it is.

“Deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
O death in life, the days that are no more.”

The words ring in her ears! “The days that are no

more!" That *have* been, but can never be again. They are done with—cast aside—dead. "Death in Life!" Yet she must go on living. Not only that, but she must learn to adapt her ways to her husband's ways. She must learn to think of him, and him only.

Well! Why not? why not? Is he not worthy of all thought? Many women have been condemned to marry men despicable in their eyes. But for her all that is different. With a strong determination she calls to light Crawford's gentle air, his deeds of charity, so unostentatiously displayed. His kindness. His goodness to the children who are to her as brothers and as sisters. His loving care for her. The extreme humbleness that characterizes his every action. His unmistakable disregard for the wealth that makes him without his will a person of importance. Do not all these things make him mightier than his fellows? Surely she is a fortunate girl, that one so faultless should have chosen her from out the whole wide world to love and cherish.

She has worked herself, as she hopes and believes, into a proper frame of mind; she has brought the glow of admiration to her cheek; she seems to herself filled with an honest appreciation of Mr. Crawford's excellences, and——

And all at once she finds herself where she began. Oh! Mother Nature, who shall conquer thee! In a flash as it were the face of Eaton Stamer rises before her, ill-tempered, frowning, as when last she saw it, but to her, alas! the dearest face on earth.

She covers her eyes with her hands, and presses her fingers against them despairingly, as though bent on killing that sweet forbidden memory.

A faint rustle in the straggling grasses—a stir in the dried leaves! Her hands fall to her sides, and she finds herself looking at the real Eaton—the original of the vision that has been tormenting her. *Is* he real? or a fresh torture? Oh! *how* has he found his way here—here of all places where she believed herself secure?

It is hardly the Eaton of her everyday life. What has happened to him? He is pale, haggard, stern.

"Well!" says he thrusting aside a bramble with a force hardly necessary, and coming straight up to her.

A horrible fear that she is going to faint, has for the

moment smitten her; she recovers herself, however, and hardly knowing what she does, goes mechanically forward and holds out her hand to him in ordinary greeting. He flings it aside.

"What's this you've done?" demands he roughly.

"I don't understand," returns she faintly, though she is growing more herself already; that very roughness of his, has helped to restore her courage. Her late weakness, however, is exemplified by her answer to his attack. It has left him an open road.

"Don't you?" says he vehemently. "Then I'll explain it to you. You have engaged yourself to—you have promised to marry—a man for whom you entertain no smallest spark of affection. You have flung aside all honour, all honesty, all womanliness, and for the sake of the filthy dross of this life have consented to sacrifice yourself, soul and body!"

"Surely—*surely* you don't know what you are saying," says she striving to be calm, whilst carried away by the storm of his passion. "You must be *mad* to talk to me like this! Why should you judge me so? Why think so vilely of me? I am not angry, Eaton," her right hand tightening convulsively in a fold of her gown—her breath coming with difficulty. "You are not quite yourself to-day, are you?"

"No—not quite," says he. "I am glad you understand so much at least."

"Well, it is difficult to understand," answers she coldly, a long heavy sigh having given her some relief. "Why should I not marry Mr. Crawford—or any one else I choose?"

"Confine yourself to Mr. Crawford, please. You have no right to marry him, at all events."

"No?" says she; "and why?"

"We both know that. The answer to it is as well known to you as to me. In that we agree if we have nothing else in common."

"I never guessed a riddle in my life," says she with a pale smile.

"Must I explain again, then? go over the old ground? You *used* not to be so dull, but if——"

"No, no," putting up a warning hand. "If you would repeat yourself, I refuse to hear. And"—turning upon him

with a sudden glow of anger—"what do you mean by coming here to-day and talking to me like this? What are you to me, or I to you? Are you my conscience?"

"I don't know what I am to you, but I know what you are to me, and you—know it too."

"I know nothing," says she icily. The memory of that last day when he had come to her, and had spent his last hours in trivial altercation, comes to her and sustains her. He *might* have spoken and he didn't. "You come here to-day upbraiding me. For what? For promising to marry the kindest, gentlest man I have ever known!" A little sob chokes her for a moment, but she conquers it. "What right have *you* to censure me, even were censure due?"

"The one great right of all. I love you!" He is very pale as he says this, but he makes no movement towards her. There is passion in his gaze, but unconquerable resentment too.

"Ah! you should have said that sooner," cries she with a little violent laugh. A thrill of exquisite pain is rendering every limb almost lifeless, but the brain endures. "You are too late now. And do you think I will believe you?" cries she, taking a fierce step forward. "Now—*now* to believe you. Oh, no, no, *no*!" She pauses and passes her hand languidly across her brow; the first violence of her grief is past. "You should have said that sooner, or left it alone altogether," says she, with a suggestion of numbness. "I don't believe it now. I don't indeed. There was so *much* time before, and yet——" she sighs. "You did not think of me when I was free, and now—now you come here to annoy—to insult me."

"To insult you, Evelyn? If the truth is an insult it lies before you. But why should it be? As for your suggestion that I did not think of you——" he breaks off suddenly as if trying to control himself. "Well, I leave that to yourself."

"Then I refuse to have it so left," cries she passionately. "You—you speak of your love for me, and yet on that day on which we parted, when you knew you were going away for weeks and weeks, what did you say of love *then*? You came, you saw me lying ill and in pain, and how did you treat me? Not one word of love, or sympathy even. You were cold, cruel, indifferent! You knew you were parting from me for a long, long time; surely that was a time to say *all that might be in one's heart*, but *you*—said nothing.

Nothing was there, perhaps. And now—when I am betrothed to another man, you come back, and——. How” —breaking off abruptly, and regarding him with scornful eyes—“how am I to think of it all?”

“You pretend to blame me, yet am I to be blamed?” says he. “That day—how could I say what I had come to say? Believe me or not as you will, but I started that morning with but one desire in my heart—to ask you to be my wife!”

“I won’t believe you!” cries she sharply, wincing as if from a blow.

“Of course you won’t believe me—that is part of the scheme,” says he rudely. “But it *is* so, for all that. I was going away. I felt as if I could not go until I had a word from you, and when I came, how was it with you? In tears for Crawford!” bitterly. “I say one word against that immaculate person, and behold you up in arms for Crawford. It was Crawford, Crawford, Crawford all through! I could not speak, and yet,” with rising reproach that is so full of despair as to make it eloquent, “you must have known! You *did* know; and knowing, you deliberately deceived me!”

“Take care!” says she slowly, with a dull but heavy concentration. “One can go too far.”

“*You* have,” says he recklessly. “And for the rest, I don’t care how far I go. I’ll have it out with you now and be done with it. For me there are no consequences—our friendship, such as it was, ends to-day.”

“You are a coward,” says she breathlessly. “You think only of yourself. Your own feelings are all that concern you.”

“Why not?” says he, with a strange smile. “*My* feelings are the only ones concerned in this affair. As for you—you have none!”

Evelyn, raising her large eyes, for the first time to-day, looks steadily at him.

CHAPTER XLV.

“You are wrong,” says she gently.

“Am I? I think not. It is a popular delusion that one can’t live without a heart—the vital organ, you know—the

one thing necessary to life—but that is all mere folly ! You haven't a heart of even the poorest description, yet you get through the world as well—oh ! *better*—than most of us."

"You throw yourself away," says she icily, yet smiling all the time. "You are apparently a thought-reader before whom the rest of that clever lot might well quail. How deeply you must have studied me to understand me so entirely ! In truth, I envy you your prescience."

"Well, I don't envy *you* !" says he ruthlessly. "You would make light of my accusations, but——. *Come*, now, Evelyn !" advancing towards her, and grasping her hand with a rude determination, and compelling her body, at least—although not her eyes—to face his. "To get back to our first argument. You will swear to your verity of soul, won't you ? And yet on that last day of ours, to which you cling as being damnatory evidence against me—what of that day ? Did you not then and there declare to me that you would never marry Crawford ?"

"I said that ?"

"You, and no other. Do you think I am likely to forget ? Why, I built on that the Spanish castle that has failed me. On that day I said to you I was convinced you would never marry Crawford, and you—you said——. Pshaw," impatiently, "I forget the exact words, but at all events, I remember only too clearly what you *meant*. I said," pausing as if to force remembrance, "that I believed you would not marry him, and you," pausing again, "gave me this answer, 'An easy belief.' Yes ; those were the words. Light ones to you, no doubt, but false—false as hell."

"Not false when uttered," says Evelyn eagerly. "Why do you seek to lower me ? When I said that to you I had no idea of marrying Mr. Crawford. Why, you *must* believe that," with growing agitation. "Amongst all the other storages of your memory, amongst all the evidence you have so carefully collected for my undoing, you must recollect that just before you arrived on that day I had refused Mr. Crawford."

"So you told me," contemptuously. "And yet, one month afterwards, all the world hears that you are engaged to him. All," bitterly, "save me. I was purposely kept in the dark."

She makes a gesture as though she would have spoken, but he interrupts her.

"How well, now, I can interpret those tears," says he, with a mocking laugh. "Whatever else was false, I believe them to have been genuine. It could not have been an altogether happy experience—the accepting of a man old enough to be your father. Youth—*honest* youth—seeks youth."

"You give me the lie, then," says she, her face very white. "You think I concealed the truth that day. You accuse me of direct falsehood?"

"I accuse you of nothing. As you yourself just now reminded me, I have no right to praise or blame."

"To wilfully destroy an old friendship," says she, in a clear tone that should have warned him, but fails, "is a thing from which most people shrink. You are apparently superior to such weaknesses."

"As for that," says he, "I am no longer your friend."

"Ah! that makes it easier," says she quickly.

"Naturally! I can quite understand your view of it. Throw over any ancient feeling you may have entertained for me, I entreat you, and forget you ever felt it. I do not plead on friendship's lines—I have no faith in friendship. It is a fraud—a sentiment. I merely protest against the treatment to which I have been subjected—no more."

"What treatment?"

"Well, for *one* thing," cries he, bursting out into a storm of passion and flinging aside as though it is no longer possible to hide himself behind it the cloak of scorn with which he has been dallying, "why was I kept in ignorance all this time?" It is the first grievance—the most terrible—the most fatal. If he had known he might have come to her—have pleaded, entreated—and not perhaps in vain. It is the secrecy that has been the final thrust of the dagger in a wound already mortal. "Why did nobody write and tell me? Why was I, of all people, alone left in the dark? Only last week my mother wrote and told me of a fact that had been known to the entire neighbourhood for over a month. 'A desirable match,' she called it. So you call it, too, no doubt." He pauses, as if waiting for her to answer him, but no words fall from her pale lips. "A most *damnable* match, I call it," says he hotly.

She turns away as if to leave him, but he places himself in her path and compels her to remain.

"Not yet. You shall not go yet. It is our last meeting."

says he. "Do not grudge me a moment or two." He laughs contemptuously. "*What* a lovers' meeting! Well, never mind. You have your other lover now."

"What is it you would know?" says she desperately, yet with that touch of dignity that has supported and beautified her all through. "Ask me and I will answer. I must soon go home."

"You know," says he. "Why was not I told?"

"Where lay the necessity that you *should* be told? Why you, above all others? I don't suppose the world generally was made acquainted with the fact of my engagement. Then why you?"

"Great heaven!" says he, laying his hands suddenly upon her shoulders and forcing her to meet his gaze. "Who could have thought that a little unsophisticated thing like you could have been so false—so worldly! How *dare* you talk to me like that!" Almost unconsciously he shakes her slight form to and fro beneath his grasp, but, except for the deepening of the pallor round her lips, she gives no sign. "You, who *know* how I love you!"

"Oh! no, no," cries she, almost violently, as if warding off some terrible thing. As she speaks she moves resolutely, and shakes her shoulders from beneath his grasp. "I never thought——"

"Thought! You knew!" sternly. "You knew, too, that I believed in you. Your very silence about this wretched engagement condemns you. Oh! Evelyn, that you of all people should count money before love."

"How terribly unjust you are," says she, with a tremulous gesture. "Surely your mother, when giving you the news of my engagement, told you, too, some—some of the reasons for it? she told you the truth about it—what actually led to it?"

"Oh, the truth! There is not a scrap of truth about it from beginning to end. It is falsity itself."

She turns away from him, as though giving up argument, in a little heartbroken way that chills him, yet somehow adds to his anger against her. Is this a fresh wile? And yet, can one compel nature? Can the cheek whiten so at will? How *very* white she is, and is she slighter, more fragile than she used to be?

"You are looking ill," says he; "out of spirits, too. This money, then, has not sufficed you?"

"Are you inhuman?" cries she suddenly. Her large eyes, so much larger than they used to be, as it seems to him, or is it that her face is smaller—thinner? "You know, you *must* know"—throwing out her hands in a little agonized fashion—"they have told you, I'm sure, how it is with me, and yet you would force me to put it into words."

"I wouldn't have you distress yourself, certainly," says he, with tardy and very ungracious compunction, but she hardly seems to hear him.

"If the colonel had not been in such sore straits, if—if ruin had not threatened us, and if," mournfully, "Mr. Crawford had not come to our rescue, I might"—she hesitates, and then goes on—"I confess it to you"—lifting her heavy eyes to his—"I might never have thought of this marriage. But he came, and he was so good to us—so glad to be of use, without any thought of a recompense, that I was glad to be able to give him something in return."

"*Something!* One is bound to congratulate him upon his bargain. Certainly he has got the best of it."

"You must not, however, think," goes on she calmly, ignoring his last remark, "that I have any feeling but real honest *liking* for Mr. Crawford, or that I"—tightening her hand somewhat upon the branch of the tree against which she is leaning, but never once removing her unfriendly eyes from his—"am seeking to explain this matter to you, or excusing to you my acceptance of Mr. Crawford. I like him—I respect him——"

"And he is a very rich man. I quite see."

"He is, at all events, the best man I have ever met," says she, calmly still, and as if determined to treat him with the contempt she knows she ought to feel for him.

"And you have met so many," says he, with a short unmirthful laugh.

"I have met enough to teach me who is, and who is not, worthy of regard. One need not know the whole world to learn *that!* Half-a-dozen people are sufficient to give one a full insight into the principal faults and virtues of humanity," says this little sage with the sore heart. She delivers her text uncompromisingly, and as if she defies him to contradict it.

To her just now, life indeed seems limited, maimed—a poor affair enough, taking it all together. So much to lose in it and yet so little to gain. This is the problem that perplexes

her by its seeming unfairness, and renders her a prey to that dull despair that comes to us all now and again during our journey through this world.

All her thoughts are out of drawing to-day. There is nothing pleasant on which their eyes may rest. The foreground is but a distorted misery; the background, a blank.

"And he is the immaculate one. I hope he'll prove so. Well, it is your own affair, of course; and, for the future, you can go your way and I can go mine."

"The first truism you have uttered to-day," says she, with that new air of indifference that almost amounts to contempt that he has found so irritating.

"Not the last, however. I'll give you another. You speak of this coming marriage of yours with a brave air, and of Crawford as though he were the one man on earth. All that is very clever, no doubt, but you don't deceive anybody by it. You will marry him, of course, but you won't be able to forget one thing."

"Yes?" questions she, in a low tone, but looking straight at him.

"That he *bought* you! For that's what it comes to."

"Eaton!"

"Ah, you don't like the sound of it! But console yourself; it is a very common occurrence. It is done every day. I suppose Crawford knows what he is about. He can't be doing it with blinded eyes, and yet I pity him too—from *my* soul I do."

"Go on," says she hoarsely. "If you have anything more to say, *say* it, and be done for ever. It is the last chance you will ever have."

"I know that. This is the last time I shall ever willingly look upon your face again. The Evelyn I loved was not you, therefore am I well quit of you."

"After all," says she, with a little pale smile, "you need not congratulate yourself so energetically. There was never a time—was there?—when you were *not* quit of me. Did I ever belong to you in any way? I think not."

"You are right," says he. "I had a dream of some one, but it was the wildest dreaming. She never existed. I suppose I gave poor human nature too much credit. I believed she could create a perfect creature, and she has scoffed at my belief. However"—with a touch of satisfaction that is yet full of sorrow—"if I have fathomed your shallow

nature, he, I suppose, has not. His punishment is to come. You have flung me over, but he—he has got to live his life with you. He will find you out in time—as I have. You have deceived me—you will deceive him. More”—passionately—“you *are* deceiving him!”

“I am *not*!” in a low but vehement tone.

“You say that!”

“Certainly I do.”

“You are prepared, then, to assure me that you——”

“I am prepared to assure you nothing. I refuse to vindicate my conduct to you in any way.”

“Why, that is the oldest artifice in the world,” says he. “To stand on one’s dignity and so decline to refute the charge that cannot be refuted. You might surely do something better than that. Now here is a crucial test. Answer me this? Do you love Crawford? Ah! You will give me no reply to that. You *know* you don’t. Silence is the better part! Lying, I see, has not as yet come easy to you.”

The girl turns imperiously to him, her eyes aflame, her slender figure rigid in her anger.

“Go!” says she in a clear sweet voice that cuts him like a knife, so cold it is—so *final*. Then, as if finding it intolerable to her to look at him for even so short a time as may elapse between her dismissal and his going, she moves swiftly from him, runs down the high bank that leads to the waterfall, and is presently lost to sight amongst the heavy underwood below.

CHAPTER XLVI.]

EATON’S walk home is a rapid one, and his entry into his mother’s boudoir can hardly be called tranquil. It is mid-day, and the crisp November sun is trying with all its might to put out the glowing fire upon the hearth. Lady Stamer bending over her davenport, where she is endeavouring to get through the answers to the piles of fashionable letters that lie on her right hand, looks up at him with an annoyed frown.

“I want to speak to you,” says the young man shortly.

“I am afraid you will have to put it off till this evening,

I'm up to my eyes in business. Nothing very important, I suppose?"

"*Very* important," more shortly still. Lady Stamer, scenting battle in the breeze, puts on her armour. Her chilliest expression covers her face instantly.

"Even so, I must ask you to wait. And really, Eaton, I must protest against your habit of entering a room in this boisterous fashion. A schoolboy might be excused for so doing—but you——"

"I am sorry, but I must ask you to give me five minutes at once," says he taking no heed of her trivial querulity, and throwing up his head with that little gesture of command inherited from his father—and that is so hateful to her. "Your correspondence," with a slow and contemptuous glance at her pile of letters, "can wait so long, I dare say—of vital interest though they doubtless are."

"You are very rude," says his mother calmly. "But one understands that there is only that to be expected of you. In these days a mother succumbs to her children. I succumb to you. Now—for your mighty intelligence."

She laughs angrily, and throwing herself back in her chair and her pen into an ormolu stand, looks superciliously up at him.

Now that the very moment has arrived, he feels as if words fail him. He knows what is in his mind—his belief in her treachery, his knowledge of her vehement opposition to his union with Evelyn—but—what has she done after all?

Lady Stamer, staring at him, and noting the hesitation, laughs again.

"Come," says she. "As you seem in a difficulty, I will help you. Who should help a child but its mother? And you are a baby, my dear Eaton, in many ways, in spite of the fact that you have come to man's estate. Now I will tell you what is in your mind. You have come here to rage against me about that little D'Arcy girl—because she has very wisely chosen to marry a man who can give her all the good things of this life. Good heavens! Why storm at me, then! The girl has done it of her own free will. The girl, in my opinion, is quite right. They are all miserably poor, those D'Arcys—and if one regrets the mercenary element in a character so young as hers, still—throwing out her lovely hands gracefully, until all the dia-

monds on them flash with a pretty radiance—"it is nevertheless wise."

"You are plausible—as usual," says the young man, who has gone over to the chimney-piece, and leaning against it, is looking moodily down upon the black fur rug at his feet—no blacker than his thoughts. "But I cannot divest myself of the belief that she might have been saved from this marriage—a marriage that seems to me iniquitous."

"That is the man's view," briskly. "But, my dear boy, *why* save her? It is her own doing—and really, for my part, I think her a very clever girl. There is hardly a mother in the county who wouldn't have given her daughter thankfully to Mr. Crawford, and here is this little half-educated thing carrying him off under their noses. Rather smart of her, it seems to me."

"You always disliked her," says he slowly. "Therefore it is impossible you could understand. Prejudice blinds half the world. I have been thinking it all over——"

He has indeed. That rapid walk home, that last passionately reproachful glance she had given him—have both helped to clear his mind. He had been eager enough to declare to her that he had understood her, "fathomed her shallow nature," he had called it—but had he? Oh, how could he have spoken to her like that? And how does he dare now to condemn his mother for not understanding her?

"She is not mercenary," says he at last, in a tone full of conviction.

"It is an ugly word," says his mother agreeably. "Why use it? We can probably find another; there are so many different names nowadays for just the same thing. I have suggested to you that she is clever. Will that do? Not mercenary—not designing; she is only clever."

"She is a martyr. She is deliberately sacrificing herself," says the young man slowly. His eyes are still bent upon the rug, his mind has gone back to that last scene with her, and his heart is failing him. Somehow now it all lies clear before him—he understands her every motive. And to her terrible grief he had come, only to add to it—to give another stab to that already burdened soul. Oh, that he dared to seek her again, and at her feet demand his pardon!

"You mean that story about the colonel's difficulties, and Mr. Crawford's dropping from the clouds to save him from destruction, like the prince in a fairy tale? Rather an elderly

prince, it must be confessed," with an airy laugh. "A very pretty story, we all acknowledge, and very well got up. Beauty in distress, Beast rushing to save her. Pouf! My dear Eaton, be reasonable."

"It is the reasonableness of it that strikes me—and that makes it so cruel. The colonel would have gone to the wall if Crawford had not interfered, and—and she was too proud to take all and give nothing."

"And what was the 'all,' as you eloquently put it? A paltry two thousand pounds. Now *do* you think Colonel D'Arcy—do you think any one in any sort of position—could be ruined for so small a sum?"

"Certainly I do. D'Arcy could as easily have got twenty thousand as two; by which I mean he could not have got either. Of course he could have been sold up, and there would have been some miserable residue on which he and his might have dragged through life, but when there was a chance of escaping such a death in life, Evelyn grasped it."

"Well, and what does it all come to. You have struck the old key-note on which we started. She saw her opportunity and—grasped it."

"For *them*, not for herself."

"As you will," shrugging her shoulders, as if argument is over. "At all events, she grasped it. She saved the colonel and made herself a rich woman for life in a single stroke. That was killing two birds with one stone, with a vengeance. For my part I admire the girl, however others may condemn her. Nothing I adore like astuteness."

"You fail in astuteness here," says he, raising his eyes and for the first time looking straight at her. Condemnation and anger are burning in his glance. "Or else you are wilfully maligning Evelyn."

"Wilfully! What do you mean, Eaton?" She too has cast off her affectation of careless scorn, and her cold eyes meet his with violent indignation in them. She, who has been accustomed to rule her little world with a despot's sway, to whom even her eldest son submits—is she to be taken to task by this—troublesome younger son? A harsher adjective had risen to her mind.

"I mean what I say. Evelyn D'Arcy is neither mercenary nor designing, nor clever in the hateful way you would represent her, and you know it."

"I know this at all events," rising and leaning one hand

upon the arm of her couch; "that you are unpardonably insolent. You forget you are speaking to your mother."

"And you, you—do you not forget?" cries he with deep agitation. "Am I not your son? Is the whole happiness of my life nothing to you? You knew I loved her; if I never before put it into words for you, still you knew of it, as surely as though I had cried it aloud to heaven."

"Pray do not waste so much superfluous energy," says his mother contemptuously. "You need not seek to force the truth from me; I am perfectly willing to admit it. Certainly I knew that you fancied yourself in love with that little hoyden, and though I did not *know* it—I do not profess to be a *clairvoyante*—still I hoped devoutly that some saving clause, such as Mr. Crawford has proved, would arrive to save you from your own idiocy. You accuse me of forgetting that you are my son. I let the bad taste of that accusation go by, and I will even entreat you to remember that the first duty of a mother to her child is to see to his welfare, both earthly and heavenly. With regard to the latter," with a pious sigh, "I fear you have got beyond me, and must choose your own line now; but with the former I can still deal. Your marriage with a penniless girl would mean your social ruin."

"Therefore——"

"Therefore, I am rejoiced that, without any interference of mine, Evelyn D'Arcy has placed herself so very satisfactorily."

"Therefore," persists he hotly, taking no notice of her interruption, "you kept me carefully in ignorance of all that was going on here until it was too late for me to step in and save the girl I love from a life that must necessarily prove abhorrent to her."

"Surely she is the best judge of that. If it is so *very* abhorrent to her she can throw it up. Mr. Crawford, who seems to me to be little short of a fool, could, if he is to be considered of no further use, be very easily got rid of. But you will find that Miss D'Arcy, like a sensible girl, will see that he can be of very considerable use still."

"Let us have done with Evelyn," says he shortly. "What I came to ask you was, why was I not told of her engagement until it was a month old?"

"Really, my dear, that is a problem you must solve for yourself."

"No, it is you who can solve it. For that whole month you wrote to me regularly twice a week, yet in not one of those letters did you mention what you must have known so terribly concerned me."

"I *might* say that it was because I could not bear to grieve you," says Lady Stamer, carefully adjusting a screen between her and the firelight; "but the truth beyond everything. I did not tell you because I feared you might hurry home and cause a disturbance. I see now I was right. You would have taken the first train; you would have hastened to Miss D'Arcy; you would probably have found her with her *fiancé*; you would have given way to your ungovernable temper—there would have been a most unseemly disturbance. Miss D'Arcy, who, I am convinced, knows exactly what she intends to do, would have given you your *congé*; poor dear Mr. Crawford would have been greatly distressed, and you would have been upset—for a fortnight, or until the next pretty girl took your fancy. Now, I avoided all that. I let the engagement be thoroughly confirmed, and then I let you know of it, delicately, gently. Now it is all over, and you need not be distressed; you need not even see her."

"I have seen her," says he coldly.

"Ah!" says she. The exclamation is wrung from her in spite of her determination to treat this affair coolly. There is a silence that lasts quite a minute, and then:

"Where did you see her?"

"This morning. In the Grange Wood."

"By chance?"

"Not quite. I went up to Firgrove to see her—to learn the actual truth, and Jimmy told me where she had gone to. I followed her, and——"

"Well?"

"I insulted her unpardonably, so far as I can remember. I started full of *your* view of it, and when we met I——" He breaks off, as if recollection is intolerable to him. "Never mind. It is all over now. If she thinks of me at all, it is with no kindly feeling."

"And a good thing too," says Lady Stamer, with some acidity. "Put her out of your mind, Eaton. To persist in anything like a courtship of her, now she is engaged to another man, would be little less than immoral."

"You speak as though she were already married."

"Well, so she is, in a sense. Decent people, when they engage themselves, have undertaken all the duties, the responsibilities of matrimony. And in this matter see what a good match it is for the girl!"

"A loveless match can never be a good match," gloomily.

"But who is to say it isn't a love match," says she, forgetting her first theory, in her desire to convince him of the futility of interfering with Evelyn's engagement. "Mr. Crawford is a charming man—quite an acquisition to the neighbourhood—young and old admire him. Why should not a girl like Evelyn—who knows so little of the world—be captivated by him?"

"Why, indeed! And if so, how is she mercenary, designing, and *clever*;" says he, with a short laugh. Then savagely, "Why can't you leave her out of it? To discuss her with you is to feel as though——"

He subdues himself by a supreme effort.

"As though you could kill me?" suggests she, with a low laugh. "My good boy, if you feel like that, pray go away. You are doing no good here, and you are hindering me from doing what must be done before post hour. Now go. Miss D'Arcy's engagement is a *fait accompli*—why discuss it?"

"It is not accomplished yet," with a strange note in his voice that instantly alarms her.

"Any one who would seek to upset that engagement would be acting maliciously," says she coldly. "I believe no son of mine, however alien to me in thought and sentiment, would be guilty of a dishonourable action."

"What is honour?" says he suddenly, turning to her.

"If it is to be a fresh argument I confess I am unequal to it. I must beg, Eaton, that you will leave me. I can bear no more," says she, waving him to the door with a gesture not to be combated.

CHAPTER XLVII.

"TIME and the hour runs through the roughest day," and this one long sad day has at last come to an end. Night has fallen with a sullen haste that speaks of storm before morning, and has cast its gloomy veil upon the patient earth. As yet the heavens are clear, if threatening; the wind

is low ; it is almost warm for the time of year, and even a spiritless moon may be seen now and then, trying in a faint-hearted fashion to do the right thing, and climb her heaven.

Evelyn, who had come home from her unhappy meeting with Eaton feeling crushed morally and physically, and with a severe headache, had declared herself unwell, and had lain all day long upon her little bed, battling fiercely with the misery that has overtaken her. To be true, to be faithful, to the man who has been so good to her and hers, is her chief desire. But, oh ! how to kill the longing for that other man, who has been almost brutal to her—who has been unjust, blind, cruel—but who loves her too.

As evening grows into night a desire to go out into the quiet garden and feel the wind blow upon her tired head takes possession of her. Slipping softly downstairs, she passes on tiptoe past the door of the sitting-room, where she can hear the merry voices of the elder children fighting gaily over their *bélique*, and with a sigh of relief opens the small door at the end of the passage that leads directly into the garden.

The feeling that she is giving the children the go-by brings a half-amused smile to her face. Darling children ! It is indeed but seldom that she ever cares to avoid them. But just now she could not endure even their harmless prattle, and if they got only a hint of this delightful adventure of hers, this stepping out into the cold sweet dark, at the ungodly hour of ten, not all the mothers and fathers in Christendom would have been able to keep them back from following her. Therefore much caution is necessary.

Her desire is gained ! She has closed the door softly behind her ; she is now stepping lightly into the silent garden. The damp short grass is at her feet, the sky above her head. The wind, slight as it was, has ceased. A strange unearthly quiet fills the wintry air.

“ Not a sound is heard,
No sights are seen ; no melancholy bird
Sings tenderly and sweet ; But all the air
Is thick and motionless—as if it were
A prelude to some dreadful tragedy.”

There is indeed something oppressive in the night—that threatening of thunder all day long, now culminating—that

had, no doubt, added to the nervous attack that is making her temples throb.

Still, this is better than the small room upstairs. There is space here, and vastness, and a chill that soothes her. Lost in her own thoughts she goes idly onwards until an opening in the laurustinas on one hand, and a path through the leafless rose trees on the other, compels her to make a choice.

The laurustinas that seem to be opening their arms to her look nevertheless dark and forbidding. Beyond them, however, lies a little summer-house. The pale moon overhead is casting on its roof a sickly ray or two. It will be a resting-place. Surely in its calm seclusion she will be restored to some sort of quietude.

She has taken twenty steps or so in its direction when the consciousness that some one is coming *towards* her brings her to a frightened standstill. At this hour—who can it be? She so questions herself, but in truth she knows. How often has he come and gone during her short life! How many and many a time has she listened for that step that is now coming closer—closer! But that he should come *now*! And after all that happened this morning!

A wild mad rush of joy darting through all her veins lends her strength. She stands motionless, but involuntarily, unconsciously, holds out her hands to him in the darkness.

"Evelyn! Evelyn!" cries he, grasping them, and holding them as though in an eternal grasp. "It *is* you? I was going up to the house, but——"

"Yes, it is I," says she, leaving her hands in his in her tumult of delight and tightening the grasp of her slender fingers upon his. "Can you not see me?"

"I have come back," says the young man hurriedly, "to implore your forgiveness—to go on my knees to you. I find I cannot *live* unless I am at peace with you."

"Oh, that is all right," says she, breaking into low feverish laughter. "I forgive all—everything. You did not mean it. I felt even *then* that you didn't. Oh," laughing again in a soft but heart-breaking fashion, "I don't know what I should have *done* if you hadn't come. The long night—and always thinking—and——"

She stops abruptly; that eager laughter dies. A heavy shudder shakes her slender frame, and she bursts into tears.

"Oh, it is all wrong," cries she, dragging her hands from his and covering her eyes. "It is *terrible*! I am mad, I think! Oh, go away again. You should never have come—never."

"I think I should," says he stoutly. "You are tired. Come in here"—leading her towards the little thatched house—"and let us argue it out quietly."

"Argument is useless," says she finally. Some thought that means despair has checked her tears, and she now looks up at him in the dim moonlight with large sad eyes.

"You can't know that yet. Let me lay my case before you."

"There is another case," says she.

"Yes. But surely not so strong a one as mine?"

"Stronger," sadly.

"You make too much of it," says he. "Say he did you a good turn once, is that any reason why you should give up the whole happiness of your life to him? Oh, Evelyn! Darling heart! If you have no pity for yourself, I implore you to have pity upon me."

He catches her hand and presses it passionately to his lips.

"Ah! it is too late for that," says she with a strange smile. "You might have had pity on me, but you didn't. No," interrupting him when he would have spoken, with a determined gesture, "not a word. I want no explanations; it is all over now. There is an end of whatever friendship may have been between us."

"Don't say that," says he, growing deadly pale. "Do you forbid me your presence? If this horrible thing must be, at least do not cast me utterly adrift—do not fling me altogether out of your path. I was a brute to you this morning, I know that; but I felt half mad—and—Evelyn,"—crushing the hand he holds between both his own—"must you marry that man?"

"I must," in a frozen sort of way.

"But it is wicked; it is devilish! You will betray both him and me. My darling," in a desperate tone, "don't be angry—don't mind what I say; I hardly know myself what I am saying. But—don't persist in this matter; give me one word of hope—of comfort."

"I haven't one to give," in a stony sort of way. "You come," with a little sad movement of her head, "*too late*!"

"By that I am to understand that if I had spoken sooner, before I last left home, you—you would have listened to me?"

No answer.

"Oh, why did I not speak!" cries he in anguish, taking that eloquent silence for the truth it is.

"Oh, why, *why*, WHY!" sobs she, breaking once again into bitter weeping. "Why did you not say all this before?"

"I don't know," mournfully. He has folded his arms round her and is straining her to his heart. "I was afraid, perhaps. All my life, I think—I *know*—I have loved you, but until this last summer it never became quite clear to me, and then—oh, don't cry like that, my sweet—my love——"

"And then?" asks she miserably, recalling him from her present grief to that past one when she had seemed to be less than nothing to him, whilst he had been all in all to her.

"Why, then you were cold to me," says he; "you *were* cold, Evelyn; you must remember that. And then that cursed Crawford came with all his money, and they whispered to me that you were a sensible girl, and were seeing your way clear to be a rich one as well."

"And you——" making an effort to break away from his protecting arms.

"No, I did not believe them; never—never. Not for a moment. But," with hesitation, "you certainly threw me over for him very often."

"Oh, no!"

"Well," humbly, "it seemed so to me. And I grew nervous about it. After all, what is there in me that a girl should specially fancy me?" says Captain Stamer with such astounding modesty as only love the all powerful could create. "And that last day, you know, when I came up here to you, you were dreadfully—er—er; you were really, darling."

"Who? I!" exclaims she, showing herself thoroughly conversant with the foreign language he is using. "Oh! it was you who were cruel—cold—unjust."

Evidently the "er—er" had meant all this.

"Was it? Perhaps so. I didn't know it," says he dejectedly. "I came up that day to tempt fortune—to try my fate with you, and something in your manner, something purely imaginary, I am *sure*," hastily; he is growing posi-

tively abject now, "prevented the words from passing my lips. I could not ask you to marry me when I felt your answer would be No."

"I don't know how you could have thought that," says she with naïve but very mournful wonder. "As for me I was always so afraid that you would guess how it was with me."

"Too afraid, I suppose," says he with a deep sigh.

"Perhaps so!" with a deeper. "But how was I to know? You seemed to like every girl just as well as you liked me."

"Evelyn!"

"Well, you *did indeed*. I'm sorry if it sounds horrid, but that's just how it looked to me. Those Staveley girls, now! You remember that day at Parklands when you gave Esther a rose?"

"No, I don't indeed."

"Oh! well, I do."

"But I suppose she asked for it, and in one's own home how was one to refuse her? You wouldn't have me refuse her, would you?"

"I don't know," slowly—and with a searching glance that quite undoes him. "I don't know whether she asked you for it either, but—you needn't have *smiled* at her when you gave it."

This, being plainly a grievance that has long rankled, is received by Stamer with due gravity. In truth he is so sad at heart that not even the absurdest of his little sweetheart's remarks could move him to mirth.

"I wish I had frowned," says he. "But it didn't occur to me. I wish too," tightening his hands on hers and regarding her in the uncertain moonlight with a miserable regret, "that I had dared all things at our last meeting and asked you to marry me."

"*Don't!*" says she, dragging her slender fingers out of his and turning away.

"But, Evelyn!" coming closer to her, encouraged by that impetuous movement, so full of poignant regret. "Surely it is too early to despair. You do not belong to him yet. And now that we both know that we love each other, why need this unfortunate engagement with Crawford be carried farther? You *do* love me, don't you? And I—"

Words seem to fail him here. Folding his arms once

more around her, he draws her to him, and stooping seeks to kiss her, but——

CHAPTER XLVIII.

SHE denies him. Laying her hand against his lips, she presses him gently from her. He accepts the refusal at once; there is something in her eyes that checks him. Imprinting the caress he would have given her, upon her small brown palm instead, he instantly releases her.

"You will give him up?" says he calmly.

"Who? Mr. Crawford?" With a startled glance.

"Yes. Why not? He is less than nothing to you."

"You are wrong there," nervously. "He——"

"Has done you one immense service, no doubt; but beyond that, has no part in your life. You will not persist in this affair, Evelyn? You will throw aside this——"

"I cannot," says she in a low tone and with a little frightened expression. "You don't know; you don't understand. I—I *daren't*."

"Daren't?"

"Yes. I'd be afraid to tell him I wouldn't marry him. Oh! let me go, Eaton," beginning to cry bitterly. "Don't, don't, *don't* hold me. I belong to him. You were right this morning when you said he had bought me. That is how I feel about it. I am his. There is no escape for me. It is as though I were a slave, tied and bound, and without voice or power of my own in the matter. Oh! what shall I do?" cries the poor child sobbing violently now. "Oh, why, why am I so unhappy?"

"You are taking an absurdly morbid view of the whole thing. It won't be a pleasant task no doubt, but the straightforward course for you to take is to go direct to Crawford and tell him you made a mistake, and that——"

"I couldn't," wildly. "He would listen to me, and he would say nothing, and there would be a look in his eyes——No," miserably, "I'd rather die than do it. You," faintly, "have no idea how *dreadfully* fond he is of me."

"I can make a guess at it," grimly. "Still—I think you should be just to yourself as well as to him, Evelyn."

"He wouldn't thank me for such justice," says she sorrowfully.

"You are prepared then to sacrifice three lives," says he in a new tone, so strange, so grave, so full of something that is almost sternness that her heart, if possible, sinks lower. "You think me dishonourable for suggesting this course to you—is your conduct honourable, do you think?"

"Well," says she with a heavy sigh, raising to his her large eyes, dark with tears, "it is I who shall suffer for it."

"Oh, no," says he with a most unmirthful laugh. "Don't console yourself with *that* fiction! We shall all three suffer, and Crawford, of whose happiness you are so careful, will probably suffer most of all. Come, Evelyn, be sensible. Do as I advise you. Break through these trammels and be yourself again."

"I could not," almost inaudibly.

"You mean you will not. After all," coldly, "why should you? There are many things for, as well as against, this marriage. I grow ridiculous when I seek to pose as one of such extreme importance in your life."

He turns abruptly from her. He might, perhaps, in his angry misery have left her, but the grasp of a small cold hand, the eager clinging of trembling fingers around his, recalls him to his gentler self.

"It is our last, last time together," whispers she desperately. "Don't be unkind to me. Don't, *darling*."

The fond appellation, coming from her as though wrung from her in her pain, goes to his heart.

"Oh, no," exclaims he sharply; "not that, Evelyn; not that." He feels as though a dagger has been plunged into him. "Unkind to her!" He presses the hand he holds, passionately to his lips, since sweeter joys are refused him. "But when a man's heart is breaking, how is he to know what words he uses? And see now, Evelyn," trying to recover himself and attain to a calm judicial air. "Say Crawford is miserable for a month or two after you—you——"

"Throw him over. Go on. Why hesitate about it?" wearily.

"Well, yes. Surely that is not so bad as for you to be miserable all your long sweet life."

"You talk like that," says she slowly and with the slightest *souffron* of reproach. "You. Will you be miserable, then, for only a month or two, when——" She falters.

"But that will never be," says he promptly and with

sudden fervour. All his courage has come back to him. He seems fresh and vigorous, and very fit "to fight his battle o'er again." "It is not worth an argument. I will resign you to no man living. Why should I?" with increasing valour, seeing she does not seek to silence him. "Love is lord of all, and love is on my side; he has given you to me, and no other."

"Cruel love!" says she with a smile that is sad as a tear.

"Don't look at it in that way."

"Is there another way? He has placed my heart where it would be—my body he has forgotten."

"He has left that for your own bestowal. Do his generosity justice. Say you will give up Crawford."

"You forget," clasping her hands nervously before her, "that I—owe him, not only unfailing kindness, but a large sum of money."

"Do you mean to say that you think he——"

"No. No. Don't so persistently misjudge him. He gave freely, gladly, with all his heart, and without thought of reward. I will even confess to you, Eaton," colouring hotly, though she knows he cannot see her crimson cheeks, "that I had to entreat him to marry me before he would consent."

"Oh, I daresay!" says Captain Stamer derisively. "I think I see you begging to *any* man to marry you—in vain."

"Well, he would not hear of it at first," sighing. "And it was only when——"

"When the farce was clearly played out, and he was quite sure he had made his magnanimity apparent to you, and he began to fear you might take him at his word, that he nobly consented to—destroy your whole life. Pshaw! It's as plain as a pikestaff."

"How unjust you can be!"

"Not to Crawford," with conviction. "From the first moment I saw him I felt a distrust to him; and I cannot yet believe it was unfounded."

"You distrusted me too," says she sadly.

"That you must forgive me," rejoins he as sadly. "It was not a real distrust either; nothing deep rooted; the mere madness of a moment, rising from a heart that was on fire with grief and despair. It arose through love of you."

"He loves me too!"

"Don't speak like that, Evelyn," exclaims he vehemently.

"It is horrible to me to think that he so much as dares to love you. Oh!" changing from vehement anger to entreaty as vehement, "my dear, *dear* girl, why will you wilfully ruin both our lives?"

"You talk like that—as if you condemned me," says she with deep agitation, and thrusting him from her when he would have sought to draw nearer to her. "But what would you have me do, then? He saved the colonel from terrible misfortune; he restored to Kitty her peace of mind; he rescued the children from penury and discomfort; he gave the colonel—oh no, no—he gave *me* £2,000; and am I to give him in return only base ingratitude? Only a broken heart and a trust betrayed?"

"As to the money," says he, "I can get that. I can manage it easily. Why on earth, darling, didn't you ask me for it at the beginning?"

"Where could you have got it? Where could you get it now even?" says she with growing dejection. "Besides, I could never have asked you or any one for it. He offered it."

"I can get it now," eagerly. "Bertram——"

She checks him by a gesture.

"Do you think it likely he or your mother would help you in any scheme that would enable you to marry *me*? Besides," rising from the rustic bench on which she had seated herself a minute ago, "even if they would—it would be useless."

"One word," entreats he, detaining her, but very gently. "If I *can* arrange it—then?"

"You mean," says she slowly, "that if you can repay Mr. Crawford the £2,000, that then I might honourably consider all things at an end between him and me. But what of his kindness, his delicacy, his faith in me, his generosity in coming forward to help us, when no one else came?"

"That is unjust," says Stamer coldly. "I heard—I knew nothing."

"No, no," impatiently. "I was not thinking of you—of any one—only of him! Who shall repay all his tenderness to me and mine? *I alone!* And am I to do so by abandonment, by treachery, by cruelty?"

"He is fortunate in being so high up in your esteem," says he with a sneer. Then, "Oh! forgive me again,

Evelyn," cries he with deep contrition. "After all, who am I that I should sneer at him? I begin to think he is the better fellow of the two. He does not wound you as I do."

"No," says she in a low voice.

"Ah," jealously, "you allow him all virtues, me none."

"Alas! How I wish I saw none in you," cries she with sudden bitter vehemence. "I wish you were as I thought you a month ago, without love for me."

"Is love for you a virtue?" says he laughing sadly. "Why, then indeed I have it so largely that it must cover the multitude of my sins."

"It is a misfortune," says she. "Before, when I believed you cared less than nothing for me, it was all easier, simpler if," with a swift, adorable glance at him, "even *more* unhappy. I had my life arranged for me then; a dull one, without hope, but without this new terrible pain. And now, now——! Oh, it is cruel of you! You come here, you tell me what I have craved to hear for all these dreary months, but you tell it me too late! You leave me nothing now in the whole wide world save regret and—remorse."

"You upbraid me. Have I then no grievance, no regret?"

"You will forget—in a month or two."

"Evelyn! Evelyn!" cries he passionately. He throws his arms round her and strains her to his heart, thus once more in a measure taking her into possession. "Am I nothing to you that you persist in this hateful engagement? Give him up—give yourself to me instead. Do you think if he knew, he would wish you to marry him? If he is the paragon you represent, would he not rather secure your happiness than his own? See now, heart," pressing her hand against his cheek, "if you are afraid, let me speak to him!"

By a single vehement effort she releases herself.

"What folly!" cries she feverishly. "You to speak to him! Now, once for all, Eaton," leaning towards him and holding up her hand with an imperious gesture. "I forbid you to speak to Mr. Crawford on this matter. You hear?"

"You shall be obeyed, of course," returns he stiffly.

"Of course," says she with that little touch of childish hauteur that he had always thought so sweet in her. "And now good-night." She seems in a hurry to be gone. Per-

haps she dreads more words, more arguments, stronger entreaties.

"I shall see you to the door," says he stiffly still.

"No, no," eagerly. "There is no need. "Good-night." She holds out to him her hand nervously. It has grown very cold.

"How cold you are," says he anxiously. "I suppose you are not half warmly made up, and now you have got a chill. Come indoors quickly; what madness of me to keep you out at this hour."

"Madness indeed!" says she, but too low for him to hear her. A madness that will affect her her whole life long. Oh! if she had not come out—if she had not met him—she might never have known this deep, sweet thrill of pain; might never have known how *well* he loves her. Yet would she be without the knowledge?

She turns at the door to give him a last glance.

"Remember, I shall not give you up," he says doggedly, and a moment afterwards is lost in the darkness.

CHAPTER XLIX.

"Sweet day! so cool, so calm, so bright,"

QUOTES Mr. Blount effusively, staring at the rivulets that are rushing down the panes. Patter, patter, patter goes the rain in most lachrymose numbers. The sky is a dingy brown, the wind is whirling round the house, the storm threatened last night is commencing to-day with a vengeance.

"Specially the 'cool,'" goes on Mr. Blount thoughtfully. "The sweetness of *that* quite enters into one's old bones. Do I know you well enough, Mrs. D'Arcy, to be entitled to poke your fire?" making a furious onslaught on that handsome mass of glowing coal and wood as he speaks. "If not, say so. By Jove!" standing still for a moment and staring out of the window that overlooks the avenue, with the poker uplifted in a martial manner. "Here comes Crawford. *Nothing* would keep that fellow at home, I suppose."

Evelyn, who is sitting on a distant ottoman, pretending to embroider a child's frock, starts slightly, and a deep, dull red flames into her cheeks. Must she stay, must she meet

him, he with that kindly, unsuspecting, trusting smile of his, and she——!

If it had been last month—a year ago—but last *night*! Hours so few between then and now that they seem like seconds. If she could but forget *his* words, and looks, and—Oh! how *could* she have let him put his arms round her?

Her heart seems to burst with one long sigh. But she pores over her needlework industriously, lest her misery should grow apparent to the other two in the room. No! there is no chance of escape; Kitty would think it strange if she withdrew, and Batty is always such a fool, he would be sure to say something odd about it. And besides, there will be always days, and days, and days——. Just as well to face it at once. And after all it won't be so bad with Batty here. It was a merciful Providence that sent him over this morning, that started him before the rain began. If he hadn't been here, Kitty would have thought it her kindly duty to go away presently under the pretence of heavy domestic requirements, but now she will stay to talk to Batty. What a life it is! One perpetual tutoring of oneself from morning till night, and never the task perfected.

"Dear me! is it really Mr. Crawford?" asks Mrs. D'Arcy. "I'm afraid he must be very wet. It is he indeed," peering over Mr. Blount's shoulder and smudging her sleeve with his poker. "He must be drowned!"

"Let us hope not," with a tragic uplifting of his eyes and the poker, "for Evelyn's sake. The misguided but—still dearly-beloved—Evelyn, who has had the folly to prefer him to *me*. Besides, dear Mrs. D'Arcy, if you will just look you will see that he is as safe as Noah in his ark. Like the patriarchs of old he has brought his tent with him."

"Certainly it *is* big," says Mrs. D'Arcy admiringly, alluding to Mr. Crawford's umbrella, which, to say the truth, has nothing mean about it. The avenue is one of those that are without the orthodox windings, and therefore Mr. Crawford's coming can be watched from afar, from the moment he enters the gates of Firgrove until he lands under the shelter of the porch.

"It is unrivalled. It is of noble dimensions. It is worthy of all imitation," declares Mr. Blount enthusiastically. "It is a parachute of which any man might well be proud. It is the literal family umbrella of which we have all heard so much, but which so few of us have seen in the

ribs. Where under heaven did he get it? Perhaps," with a burst of inspiration, "he *made* it!"

"Oh! nonsense!" says Mrs. D'Arcy, who is the kindest soul alive, but not perhaps the smartest.

"Well, Evelyn, I'd hang on to it if *I* were you," says Mr. Blount. "It's a most useful article. It is quite big enough to shelter you and Crawford and all the little——"

"If I were you, Batty," says Evelyn, checking him severely, "I shouldn't let him see me peeping at him through a window."

"True, true," says that genial youth, lowering the poker, but otherwise taking no notice of her suggestion. "There is something truly undignified in the word peeping. One shouldn't peep! But," bursting into a wild giggle as his eyes still follow Crawford's tall, advancing frame, "did you ever see such an ass as he looks? Now why on earth couldn't he have stayed at home on such an ungodly day as this?"

"Why couldn't you?" retorts Miss D'Arcy forcibly.

"Evelyn!" says Mr. Blount reproachfully. "Are *you* the one to ask that question? Good heavens! is there any wild beast of prey as cruel as '*the young girl*'? You know it is my hopeless love for you that drives me thither through the blinding rain."

"I don't believe it was raining one drop when you left Parklands," says Miss D'Arcy unrelentingly.

"Raining or not raining," says Mr. Blount, adroitly avoiding this insinuation, "you know I never can keep away from you."

"Well, perhaps Mr. Crawford can't either," says Mrs. D'Arcy with her pleasant little laugh.

"*Was* it raining?" demands Evelyn fixing Mr. Blount with an uncompromising eye.

"Was it? Let me see?" says that young man throwing himself at once into a deeply meditative attitude, and staring at the ceiling as though his life depends upon wringing the truth from it. "Well," with noble truthfulness, "perhaps not. If it had been——"

"You'd have stayed at home," puts in Miss D'Arcy ruthlessly. "What a pity it *wasn't*," says she presently adding rudeness to the ruthlessness.

"Why?" demands he mildly. "I don't think it would have made much difference. I have assured you I can't

live without you, and a dogcart can generally be squeezed out of my aunt, even if Sir Bertram is away. I should have come all the same."

So he would! A half word that he had forced from Eaton in his jesting fashion last night, when Eaton had come rather late into the smoking-room looking fagged and wretched and hopeless, had determined him to walk or drive to Firgrove to-day, were all the elements astir. News of her, however bald, would be welcome to Stamer's bruised spirit.

"Oh! I daresay," says Evelyn impatiently. She is holding herself together as well as she can, but she is distinctly out of tune with all her surroundings. Oh! to get away—to hide—to efface herself.

"To be rude to the one that adores you is surely a thankless task," says Mr. Blount with overwhelming severity. "But I know it is the one thing to be expected of woman! However, time may teach you that—Hallo! Crawford! *Here* you are! Who'd have thought it! This *is* a surprise! And *dry* too! Came in your brougham *of course*! Odd thing, you know; but Evelyn and I were just saying that in all probability, in spite of the weather, you would be sure to look in."

Crawford has shaken hands with Evelyn and has passed on to Mrs. D'Arcy, so providentially does not see the indignant glance the former has directed at Mr. Blount. That ingenuous youth receives it full, and shows his deprecation of it by a display of gestures hardly to be rivalled by the most advanced acrobat.

"What would you *have*, my dear girl?" whispers he tragically, whilst Crawford is asking questions about the colonel's cold. "The most correct thing in the world! Showed him your mind was entirely given over to him. Eh? Couldn't be better, eh?"

"I do hope you are not wet," says Mrs. D'Arcy hospitably to Crawford. "*Such* a day!"

"Yes," says Crawford. "Very bad. I had no idea it was going to be more than a shower when I left home, but you see we never know what is going to happen next in this happy-go-lucky world of ours. I felt dull—the atmosphere perhaps—I thought," with a slow loving glance at Evelyn, "I would come down here to be cheered."

"Well, so you shall be," says she, throwing down her

embroidery, and coming at once up to the hearth-rug where he is standing. "But how are we to cheer you on a day like this?"

"Providentially I brought the *Times* with me," says Mr. Blount, drawing that paper from his pocket. "It's always full of information, and murders."

"Oh! no, Batty, no murders," says Evelyn, with a sort of passionate haste.

"No murders," repeats Mr. Crawford, in a dull tone, as if echoing her request.

"That's morbidness, my dear girl; a phase of feeling that should instantly be checked. Now, at breakfast—By-the-by, I hope my gentle aunt isn't giving way to bad language by this time, at the abduction of her favourite paper—but never mind."

"You should mind," says Mrs. D'Arcy, severely for her. "And it was foolish of you too, as the colonel could have lent you his copy, if there is anything in it very special for you to read."

"There is! A real good thing. An awful thing!" says Mr. Blount, gazing round him, and growing positively radiant as he notes the impression he is creating. "About the best murder we've had for a twelvemonth."

"I think we none of us care much for that sort of news," says Mrs. D'Arcy, with a lingering nervous glance at Evelyn. The girl has sunk into a chair, and is staring at Mr. Blount, but she has made no further protest.

"But this is the most mysterious affair," goes on Mr. Blount volubly. "Not a clue, not a trace—all buried in mystery. No apparent reason—no robbery—watch and money found on body. Let me see—m—m—where on earth is it?" turning paper. "Oh, here! It's so extraordinary that there's a leader on it. 'Police at fault'—always *are*. 'Nothing so strange as this last appalling and apparently purposeless crime has occurred since the mysterious murder of an elderly gentleman ten years since. Some of our readers may remember it. The victim was a Mr. Darling, who was found murdered on a Sunday afternoon in his own library at 10, Sandiford Street, where——'"

A sharp cry from Evelyn, or is it a groan?—could there have been *both*?—startles Mr. Blount into silence. The paper falls from his hand, and he turns anxiously to where ~~the girl~~ is now standing upon the hearth-rug, her eyes

distended, her hands clasped upon her bosom. She is as white as linen, and there is an expression of horror upon her face that terrifies him. What has happened?

Mrs. D'Arcy has risen.

"Oh! Batty, how *could* you? Oh! you *shouldn't* have done that," cries she to the petrified youth, who is glaring at the group before him. Mrs. D'Arcy has gone up to Evelyn, the keenest sympathy upon her face, and would have placed her arms round her, but the girl presses her back, and with a little convulsive sob rushes out of the room.

"Good gracious! What have I done now?" exclaims Mr. Blount miserably. But Mrs. D'Arcy has burst into tears, and in despair of learning anything from her, Blount turns his amazed eyes to the window, where Crawford is standing.

Leaning rather against the woodwork of the window, as though power to support himself unaided is gone from him. Blount regarding him, feels that he is growing cold. What face is that? Is it Crawford's? Great heaven, what a ghostly thing? Livid, with drawn mouth and eyes staring, staring at the ground before him, as though seeing there some gruesome thing that he fain would pluck up, and grapple with, and destroy. Is the man going to have a fit?

"Crawford, Crawford, I say," says Blount, taking a step towards him.

CHAPTER L

His voice, piercing through that cruel mist of memory, recalls Crawford to himself.

"Yes, yes. What is it?" says he vaguely.

"I wish I knew," says Mr. Blount indignantly. "Here I am at one moment reading a simple paragraph from the *Times*, and lo! and behold in the next the whole world blows up. There's Evelyn bolted out of the room at a tangent, without a word of explanation."

"Evelyn?" says Crawford, gazing at him in a dull sort of way. "What has Evelyn to do with it?"

"That's it, my dear fellow! That's the whole affair, don't you see? I read to her of the murder of a poor old

gentleman, who was done to death about a hundred years ago by some dastardly ruffian, and she flies out of the room as though she herself had committed the deed."

"She—but why should *she* care?" asks Crawford, his face growing even greyer.

"Why should you, for the matter of that? Why the mystery here," says Mr. Blount, pointing to but not touching the *Times*—he has had enough of it for one day—"is a fool to this one. I wish you would explain."

"Evelyn—she was distressed," stammers Crawford.

"My dear fellow! If you are going to look like that on every occasion on which your wife is a little upset, you'll have a gay old time of it," says Mr. Blount scornfully. "Mrs. D'Arcy," going over to her, as he sees she is wiping her eyes and has stopped crying, "tell us *do*, what has so disturbed Evelyn. It is all my fault apparently; but, as you well know, I wouldn't hurt her if my life depended on it. And here's Crawford about as unhappy as they make 'em, because of her."

"Indeed you mustn't take it so much to heart," says Mrs. D'Arcy, gazing kindly at Crawford, and feeling greatly touched by his pallor. "It was a shock to the poor child, of course, but it was nobody's fault—nobody's," with a reassuring glance at Batty. "You see we never speak of it, and when you read it out so abruptly, without any warning, she was naturally a good deal disturbed."

"But read what?" asks Mr. Blount, with pardonable impatience.

"That paragraph; it came on her like a thunderbolt. Dear Mr. Crawford, you must not be so unhappy about her, you look really ill. It was unfortunate that Batty should have read out about that old—old—terrible affair—but she will get over it by the evening."

"But she——" says Crawford. He strides up to Mrs. D'Arcy, a wild light in his eyes, and lays his hand upon her arm. "That old affair—that old man—what had he to do with her?"

"*He was her father!*" says Mrs. D'Arcy simply.

"Oh, great heaven!" cries Crawford, in a fearful tone. "Oh, Evelyn! Oh, my little girl!"

It would be impossible to give any conception of the agony that thrills through his voice and shakes his frame.

"It is impossible! Impossible, I tell you! Is there?"

no mercy ! Is God a devil ! And her name—her *name* ! ” He stops short—a gleam of exquisite hope lights his face. “ Her name is D’Arcy ! ” cries he exultingly.

“ Oh, Mr. Crawford, you must not take it like this, you must not, indeed,” exclaims kindly Mrs. D’Arcy, with pathos in her trembling voice. She is frightened and troubled by his manner. “ Why should you regard it as so *present* a misfortune ? It all happened so long ago, and Evelyn should be taught to regard it calmly, not violently. If you look at it in this way, you will only encourage her in what must be termed a morbid regret.”

“ Her name—her name ? ” says he, with parched lips.

“ That can easily be explained—how I wish I had explained it always,” cries she, with a remorseful glance at Batty. “ But no one knew anything about it, except Eaton Stamer, and Evelyn made him promise to be silent. Her name is Darling.”

“ Ah ! ” says Crawford. It is hardly an exclamation—it is only a faint low sigh. This last blow, coming on the others, has left him almost lifeless. Her father ! *Her* father !

“ She has been a little absurd about it, all along,” says Mrs. D’Arcy mournfully. “ One would think it was a crime that she had committed, or her poor father, instead of that miscreant, who never was brought to justice. But she has always been terribly sensitive about it, and she is a child that one must give in to, she is so sweet, and so impetuous, and so endearing. Oh ! when it happened—although she was so young, only seven years old—it seemed to crush her little spirit to the earth. It would have broken your heart to see her pretty face. She was too young, surely, to have been capable of feeling so acutely ; yet she suffered as certainly no child ever suffered before or since. She was motherless, you know, and she and her poor father were all in all to each other. He was wrapt up in her, and she in him. When first the colonel brought her home to live with us, I thought she was going to die.”

“ Poor child ! ” says Mr. Blount gravely.

“ It was not all grief, perhaps, though that was very strong. You see,” hesitating, “ she had had a fearful shock. It was she who discovered the—the body. She was the first to enter the room and see her father lying dead. He was a very old man to *be* her father. He had married late in life.

He was lying as though he had been laid out, and the child ran up to him and looked down, and there was some blood, and it was creeping into his parted lips," shuddering, "and——"

"Stop! Stop!" cried Mr. Crawford, throwing up his hands, and staggering back against the wall.

"Oh! if you feel it so much for her, what must *she* have felt?" says Mrs. D'Arcy. She looks at him in wonderment. How fond he is of her! How terribly fond! She had heard from Mr. Vaudrey and others of his kindness, his sympathy, but that he should feel like this for another's grief, is beyond any experience she has ever had. "I really think she would have died," she goes on presently, "if it hadn't been for Jimmy. He was quite a little fellow then—a mere baby, and she grew so fond of him; she took him right *into* her, as it were. I don't think she is quite so devoted to him now," says Mrs. D'Arcy, with a nervous, little laugh. "They squabble a good deal; but just at that time Jimmy was a mine of gold to her."

"But why did you change her name?" asks Blount, who has been profoundly interested.

"Well, you see, D'Arcy and Darling have something of the same sound, and Jimmy's nurse, stupid creature, would from the first call her Miss D'Arcy; and it struck the colonel that it would be a good plan to adopt the nurse's stupidity, and so separate Evelyn's mind as much as possible from her unhappy past. Besides," says Mrs. D'Arcy, "we grew so fond of her, that I believe we liked to fancy our name was hers. And by degrees, as the servants were changed, all the new ones naturally called her Miss D'Arcy, that is when she grew too old to be Miss Evelyn, and so it became a habit, and remained so."

"Strange!" says Blount. "To lose one's identity so entirely, to actually give up one's name, must be a singular experience."

"Not so very singular, after all. Not more singular than when a girl marries. She gives up her own name then, too, but no one thinks anything about it. Mr. Crawford, you look very ill. Sit down there, and let me get you a glass of sherry."

"No—no, thank you." He seems to have a difficulty about uttering even these few words. He is still leaning against the wall, looking shrunken, old, ashen.

Blount once again regards him curiously. *Is it going to be a fit—or——*

"A little brandy, then?" says Mrs. D'Arcy, who is growing frightened. She casts an eager supplicating look at Batty, as if desirous of his opinion as to what is best to be done with the pale shaken man before her. It is perhaps the one and only time on record that Mr. Blount's opinion has been sought. And now in vain. His gaze is still riveted upon Crawford.

As if disturbed by it, and conscious of it, the latter rouses himself.

"You are very good—too good," says he faintly. "But—nothing, thank you. I feel upset, unnerved. I have an old enemy"—with a faint smile—"that often does battle with me, and I meet him best when alone. You will give my love to Evelyn, and tell her how—how——" He stops short as if unable to complete his sentence. "Tell her I had to go."

"I'll tell her everything kind, you may be sure," says Mrs. D'Arcy genially. And indeed if he believes in nothing else, he may be quite sure of that. "But are you equal to the walk home? Can I not——"

"I shall like the walk; the rain--good-bye——" He finishes his adieux with unconscious brusqueness—he the ever kind and gentle—and leaves the room with a strange abruptness. To Blount it suggests itself that the "old enemy," whatever it is, would have taken possession of him then and there had he remained a moment longer. The "old enemy"—was it the Devil?

Mr. Blount's lively mind flies o'er unknown spaceless tracts.

CHAPTER LI.

"QUEER fellow. Did you ever see such a face?" says he, when Crawford has finally disappeared and the hall door has been heard to bang comfortably and securely behind him.

"I'm glad he's gone. He'd give one the jumps."

"What a heart!" says Mrs. D'Arcy, who is one of those who "thinketh no evil." "I wish Evelyn could know how he felt for her, poor darling."

"I don't. I think she'd have been frightened out of her wits. If he had had horns and the orthodox hoof he'd have been perfect."

"Oh! Batty, and you who always are so good natured."

"Well, better say what one thinks than tell a lie about it. He has the oddest way of showing sympathy that ever I saw. When you mentioned the word blood I thought he was going to scream."

"Some people are singularly sensitive about blood."

"Some people—yes."

"I hope he will get home safely; he looked terribly unstrung."

"The rain will do him good—it will cool him. He was a volcano when he left this; let us hope he will be burnt out before he reaches the Grange, or I wouldn't give twopence for that ancestral spot."

"Poor man! I think perhaps I ought to have ordered round the colonel's dog cart——"

"He's all right," says Mr. Blount reassuringly. "His fevered brow is now being cooled by the most unpleasant process I know, and he'll come up to time presently, without a scratch." He is silent for a moment, and then:

"I am sorry about Evelyn. I don't think anybody ever heard her story; except Eaton, as you say."

"Only Eaton."

"And why Eaton specially?" with a lengthened glance at her.

"He is such an old friend of hers," says Mrs. D'Arcy, so plainly without *arriere pensee* that Blount on the spot acquits her.

"It isn't altogether useful to be an old friend sometimes."

"Why? I like old friends. An old friend is like an old chair. One delights in it—one finds shelter within its kindly arms."

"And yet sooner or later it is pushed aside, relegated to the garret, and a brand new fourteenth century article, shaking on its ancient pins, but *priceless*, takes its place."

"With fickle people only."

"Is Evelyn fickle?"

"What do you mean, Batty?" says Mrs. D'Arcy, sitting up suddenly, with a brilliant flush. "Do you mean anything about Evelyn? Oh! no, there was never anything between her and Eaton. How often have I wished that there might have been! I was never more disappointed in my life than when she accepted Mr. Crawford."

"No?" He pauses. "No, no, of course there was nothing. And a good thing too. I was only romancing, talking folly. But I wish if Plutus *was* to come up this way like spring—that he had come in other guise than Crawford."

"Oh! I don't," says Mrs. D'Arcy. "There was never any one so good as Mr. Crawford. He will adore her, and take care of her, and grant her lightest wish."

"She'll have had quite a lot of names by the time she marries him," says Batty. "Darling—D'Arcy—Crawford. After all, her own seems made for her. It excels the others. Evelyn Darling! Darling Evelyn! It's a distinctly reversible name. That's its charm perhaps. And it loses nothing by the reversing. Perhaps it gains indeed. At all events it suits her admirably either way. Happy girl! With such a name, she should never change it. And for a common-place Crawford too! By Jove!" going back to his first puzzled manner, "He is a queer fellow!"

* * * * *

Meantime the "*queer fellow*" has taken his homeward way going stolidly onwards through rain and mire, taking no heed of it, or of anything that crosses his path—filled only with a desire to find shelter, to be able to hide his head where no man may see him.

Yet he is so far alive to this fresh misfortune—this *crowning* misfortune that Heaven has sent as a last blight upon his head—that two words beat incessantly upon his brain, and keep time to his rapid footsteps as he goes.

"Her father—her father—her father!" The very stones on the road seem to cry them aloud; the wild wind shrieks them in his ears; the mad rain drives them writ in fiery letters across his eyes!

It is with a groan of passionate relief that reaching his library he closes the door, and flinging himself, face downwards upon the table, his usual position, gives himself up to thought. The door is locked—intruders are far from him—now, at last, he is alone with this new demon that relentless Fate has flung into his path. How is he to grapple with it? Better give up at once, and let the monster devour him as he stands!

Of all men in the world, why should it be *her* father? Was he not cursed enough in taking human life, in the ceaseless remorse that has pursued him night and day, for that one mad, *unmeant* crime, that now this awful sequence to it should be thrust upon him? Oh! what a vile revenge. Is Heaven implacable? Is there a Heaven? One reads of it—a sweet place—restful—free from guile, from cruelty—from vice of every sort, and yet it can shower down out of its greatness, its strength, such tortures as these upon weak irresponsible man.

There are so many men. If the deed had to be done—if he was to be so afflicted as to be ordained as the doer of the deed, was not that bad enough? Did the kind, merciful Heaven of our fables go farther still and ordain that the doer should be punished doubly for the deed in which he was but the actor under compulsion?

Compulsion! ay, that was it. He had not willed that old man's death. Was he, then, responsible for it? It was a mere shake, a knock of the grey head upon the floor, an act that would scarce have slain a babe! and yet murder—so-called—was done.

He starts to his feet. There is a wild defiance in his eyes. No, he will *not* give in! This persecution has gone far enough. He will defy Fate—Heaven—all things! She knows nothing, she need never know. He will lay the case before her—supposititiously, of course—and by *her* word he will rise or fall, and by no other. All other allegiance now and for ever he will fling to the winds—the winds of that Heaven that has blasted him.

He throws his arms upwards as though in declaration of his emancipation. Henceforth, "Evil be thou my good."

She—and she alone—shall decide for him—for life or death. All is in her hands. He will put the case before her—an imaginary case—and watch her as she answers. If she could forgive for another, why, then she could forgive for herself. And yet, to make more sure, why not represent to her her *own* case; tell her of Mrs. D'Arcy's revelation; confess himself aware that her father had been—been—— No! He grows savage here, and beats his fist lightly against the window frame. Killed by misadventure! And, if so—if—if it were proved to her that the slayer of her father had done him to death unknowingly, could she not then forgive?

It is his last chance; he will not fling it aside. Brushing the raindrops from his forehead, he moves steadily across the

room. His eyes meet the clock. Six o'clock—so late! How many hours then has he spent struggling with his misery? Hunger is so far from him that the thought of food does not suggest itself.

He will go to her now—now, this moment. The sooner the better. Let him know whether it is to be life or death before the night closes in. It is dark enough now, but, by a miracle, as it were, the rain has ceased, and a last vague, half-hearted suspicion of daylight has crept into the room.

Ringing the bell, he orders the dog-cart round to the door.

"You will be back to dinner, sir?" asked the man with a respectful glance, full of suppressed concern.

"Yes, probably."

"A glass of wine, sir, before you start?" lingering, and with increasing anxiety in his tone. His master's appearance is causing him honest disturbance.

"Well, yes! thank you; you may bring me one," says Crawford.

Drinking the wine hastily, he springs into the dog-cart and is driven rapidly away.

CHAPTER LII.

"Miss D'Arcy has a headache, but I'm sure she'll see you, sir," says the neat-handed Phyllis who opens the door for Crawford. She stares a little at seeing him at this hour, and for the second time to-day. But, with the talent for romance that adorns her class, she puts what she calls "two and two" together in no time, and revels in the niceness of her construction.

"Where is she?" asks Crawford.

"In the master's study, sir. She said she'd like to be alone, as 'er 'ed was so bad. Shall I tell her you're 'ere, sir?"

"No," says Crawford shortly. He crosses to the hall, and gently opening the door of "master's study"—a truly remarkable apartment—enters.

Evelyn, who had been sitting by the fire, with no other light in the room save that cast by glowing coals, starts to her feet and comes quickly to him.

"How foolish to come out this damp night," says she. "But it is just like you; you knew I was upset, unhappy, and you came to comfort me."

"No; to gain comfort," says he in a terribly sad voice.

"I know what that means. To give comfort is with you to gain it. Oh! you are too good to me," says she with a pang of passionate remorse. Why—why can't she drive from her all memory of that other, and give her heart entirely to this good—this perfect man—this prince amongst his fellows?

"I have heard all. Mrs. D'Arcy told me," says he, placing

a strong constraint upon himself and compelling his fainting spirit to touch lightly on the one horrible fact that has laid his life to ruins.

"Yes; I know. And perhaps," says she, looking up at him in the flaming firelight, "you dislike what she told you—you shrink from the daughter of a man who had been—murdered." She shudders perceptibly.

Crawford lays his hand upon the back of the chair next him. It is perhaps as well that she cannot clearly see the workings of his countenance. *He* to shrink from *her*! Heaven! if she only knew how he does shrink! and why! And if she knew all, how she would shrink from *him*, with fear—with horror unspeakable.

"You do not speak," says she sadly. "Well, I don't wonder. It has always seemed to me that to have a horrible thing like that connected with one, must shock people. I couldn't bear to have it talked about. Kitty has been very good about it. And you see," with growing melancholy, "I was right about it. You know it now, and now——" she breaks off suddenly. "Oh! it has blighted all my life," cries she with nervous passion.

If she had but known how each word of hers stabs the man standing beside her! He is thankful for the dull light that veils his features and hides from her his pallor—glad, too, for the first time, that she has covered her face with her hands and so hidden it from him. It has been given to him then to blight her life!

"You take an entirely wrong view of it," says he in a dull sort of way. Indeed he scarcely knows what he says. "You think that I—I——" His voice dies away altogether. It is impossible to say anything about that. "One can feel nothing for you save grief, pity, remorse——" He drags himself up sharply—a wrong word surely.

"Remorse! There is but one person who should feel that," says Evelyn: "the man who killed my father."

"And he felt it?" says Crawford, drawing nearer to her, but not attempting to take the small pretty hand that hangs so listlessly at her side.

"Well?" says she, turning her face to his, as though waiting for his reply. Her tone was hardened; as the firelight flames up and shows her face he can see that it is cold and stern and unforgiving.

"Remorse is a terrible thing," says Crawford slowly. "It is the worm that never dieth. It gnaws for ever. Death is a small thing! We are here, we are gone. The sudden ceasing is so slight a thing that we scarce know of it. But to still live, and still be always dying—to endure the death-pang daily—hourly, *there* is anguish truly—the fire that *never* is quenched."

"Death for him who dies is a small thing, perhaps, but how for those he leaves behind him? Is it so small a thing for them? How of their grief, their never-ceasing regret—their shuddering recalling of——"

She trembles and sinks into a chair ; but, though her body has grown weak in this moment of remembrance, her beautiful face still retains its expression of relentless anger.

"There is such a virtue as mercy."

"Did *he* show mercy?"

"No—no, truly—and yet he did not mean perhaps to—kill—"

"Oh, who shall say that? It is easy for those who are outside the pale of it to talk lightly of a wrong like mine. 'Every one can master a grief but he that has it.' And my father! An old man, they tell me—though he never seemed old to me; the gentlest soul alive—the most loving. After all these years I still feel in my heart the tender words, the soft, sweet names by which he called me. He never wronged a man—yet some man slew *him*—some devil, rather!" She has risen, and a very passion of revenge is quickly stirring in her. "You speak to me of mercy—to *me*. I tell you the poignancy of my grief is added to by the knowledge that now all hope of bringing his murderer to justice is at an end."

"Why should it be?" cries he. "Any day you may meet him face to face!" As he says this the strange, wild strain that lies in him, and that can change him from saint to demon at a breath awakes within him ; he bursts into loud laughter.

"Oh! that I might!" cries the girl feverishly. "That I might be the one to give him up to a just judge. You think me cruel, harsh, unfeminine ; but it was so *wanton* a crime, so uncalled for, to put out that gentle life, to silence that kindly spirit, that had no word but good for any one."

"If—if, however, it could be proved to you that it was an accident—a deed committed in haste—unmeant—and afterwards repented of——" His voice is hoarse, scarcely audible indeed. "Repented of as was never crime before. How then? There would be forgiveness then, Evelyn! *Then!*" He has grasped the mantelpiece with one hand and is shaking from head to foot. "Say it. *Say it!*" entreats he in a dying tone.

"Never!" cries she vehemently. "Coward! dastard! to kill a man *old* and enfeebled. *Never*, I tell you!" She is too agitated herself to take any notice of the emotion that has mastered him. "And you—*you*," exclaims she with passionate reproach, "why should you take his part? If you dread to marry a girl whose longing for revenge on her father's murderer is *eternal*, why," impetuously, "the road is open to you to escape."

"It is not that," says he faintly. The last dull spark of hope has gone out, the hearth is black and cold.

"No! How could I so misjudge you!" cries she, bursting into tears. "I know well how it is with you. You, with your sweet charity for all men, would even condone this worst of crimes—would seek forgiveness for the author of it. But I am not like you. I could never be as good as you are—much as it may grieve you. I must *make* you understand that if I lived for a hundred years I should still cry aloud for vengeance on my father's murderer."

"So—is it so?" says he in a voice so low, so strangely quiet, that it acts on her like a sudden rush of cold air. Her vehemence dies from her. He is sorry for her perhaps—a little grieved she should be of so unforgiving a spirit."

"You feel disillusionized," says she sorrowfully. "You know I often told you I was not so desirable a person as you thought me."

"If I had been that man—that murderer," says he irrelevantly as it seems to her. His eyes are fixed with a most touching melancholy upon hers. Had he heard her last words?

"Oh! why discuss the impossible?" returns she with a little gesture that would have waved the thought aside

"But if I *had* been," persistently. His voice is as that of a dying man, and indeed death is fast closing in upon him. This is his last throw, his final effort to vanquish the dread shadow that for ten long years has brooded over him, crushing out light and freedom and the quick joy of living.

She is struck once again by his wonderful quietude; but, then, he is always quiet. It is but a deeper phase of his usual manner. Great heaven! If she could but have looked into his heart and read there the wild storm of impatience that is almost rending soul from body as he hangs upon her answer, how would it have been with her?—with him? Would there have been anger shown—and a sharp revulsion? a horror hardly to be described? or pity—purest of virtues? or mercy—the divinest?

"No—no. Why ask the question?" asked she, shrinking from the bare idea of connecting him in any way, even in an idle moment, with the one being whom in all her kindly life she has hated.

"But if I had been that man!" repeats he with a determination that has something of madness in it. His tone is even lower now, his face more impassive. Within the storm is raging with a deadlier force Evelyn shrugs her shoulders impatiently.

"Why, if you will have it," says she vexed with him for what seems a triviality to her, "I should loathe you as you would deserve to be loathed. Not all your kindness, all your love for me, could quench my hatred or gain a pardon for you. I should crush *you* as though——"

The words seem to die upon her lips. Tears tremble in her lovely eyes. For the first time in all their short acquaintance she runs to him and throws her arms around him. There is affection as well as repentance in her action.

"How can I talk to you like this?" cries she remorsefully. "It is quite, quite true what I have said; but then, why make me say it? I am a horrid girl to speak to you thus harshly—you, who have been so good to me, who saved me from great grief, who saved my *life*."

His arms close around her. Convulsively he holds her to him, bending his head until his lips meet her soft brown hair.

Oh! pretty head! Oh! little tender love! Oh! *just God, but merciless!*

It is but for a moment he holds her so. It is an eternal farewell, and brief, but full, as eternity itself. And now a deadly chill has seized upon the heart against which he had pressed her with such a passion of despair.

He releases her, almost repulses her. If she knew would she suffer his embrace, would she not rather thrust a dagger into the breast on which but now she lay?

Well—well—well.

All at once a curious sense of indifference falls on him. A flame, flaring up vigorously, reveals his features to the girl and accentuates the utter stillness of them. A moment ago, and the pressure of his arms had seemed to assure her of his love for her, and now—— Oh! if she might understand him better—might learn to grow to him in all things good—the only things that *he* could ever teach her.

The girl's unconsciousness is blessed, but nevertheless cruel. If she could have known, perhaps, perhaps, out of the sweetness of her nature, she might have given him in time, not what he first sought, indeed, but a gentle pardon, an absolution born of many tears, a little gracious outstretched hand that might have healed his broken heart and led him heavenward.

But she knows nothing. To her his strange attitude, so curiously still, betrays no smallest grain of the truth. She wonders at him, that is all. How can she tell that this sudden calm that has fallen on him is the beginning of the end. That life, for him, is virtually over. That longing, and grief, and despair, and the cruel restlessness of uncertainty are done with for ever. He stands there stunned—hopeless—his face is passionless. One last thought is clear within his mind. In some odd way it penetrates the gloom that is fast gathering round him, and pleases him. Her last dear words, what were they?

“You, who saved my life.”

Ay, truly! If he had taken her father's life, he had given her back hers. That should count. In a dull sort of way he tries to argue this out to his advantage, but failing, falls back upon the knowledge that the sooner he gets away, and——

Yes, yes. What is there to delay for?

He is conscious of a little feeling of impatience. Yet he had saved her life! A young, fresh life is surely worth two of any *old life—old life!* An old man—old man——

“Good bye!”

He wakes up abruptly from his terrible dreaming to find himself bidding Evelyn good-night. Has he said anything since—anything strange? He cannot remember.

“Good-bye,” says she in her own pretty, gentle way that of late has grown so quiet. “Shall I come to the door with you?”

In a dream still, he makes a gesture of refusal.

"No." His tone is decisive; and Evelyn, trying to see him through the gloom of the firelight as he goes to the door, stands still, puzzled, uncertain.

At the door he pauses and looks back at her.

"Good-bye!" says he again. Something in his tone (his face is now hidden from her because of the darkness) touches and frightens her.

"You will come back to-morrow?" cried she eagerly, making a step towards him.

"Not to-morrow!" There is a dull certainty in his tone. A moment later the door has closed. He is gone.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE chill air outside revives his body, but gives no health to his mind. In the same chilled, numbed fashion, it refuses to answer to any call on it, being conscious only of the desire for solitude—for home—for the locked door of the library, behind which *it* may be done.

This desire—the desire (restrained) of many years—gains full sway now, and in the diseased brain of this man, trudging homeward through the mud and slush (forgetful of the dog-cart that had brought him, and that now stands awaiting his orders in the yard at Firgrove), grows to gigantic proportions, and fills him with a coming sense of delight long delayed. All other thoughts give way to it. Life, Love, Pleasure, Ambition—what have they to offer that can compete with the charm of Oblivion!

The house is gained; the library reached; the drawer unlocked. He stops a moment!

It lies before him now, in the palm of his hand. Such an inconsequent thing! A mere dusty substance that a breath, blowing upon it, might easily reduce to nothingness—if such a great void be—and yet possessed of power that larger things might envy.

She had said she would be revenged on him. *If she knew!* Well, without knowing, she shall be revenged! The utmost she could do would be to exact a life for a life, and the utmost shall be hers! It is as well, too—as well! In spite of all the mad fancies—born of her sweet face—*was* happiness possible to him? Other people might be strong enough to weather such life storms as he had known, but *was* he one of them? He who had been broken, spent, and crushed against the rocks and jagged edges of life, even before youth was at an end?

All this in a disjointed way came to him, and caused him to feel a sort of distant pity for himself—regarded as another.

And with this came vaguer thoughts that still did not deter him from his purpose, but had, all of them, a strange sweet attraction in them—sweet almost as she was! And since he could not have her, why—

They toss him to and fro and play with his dwarfed mind as though with a malignant desire to add to the poignancy of his despair, and always (strange inconsistency !) they draw him towards them.

"Death is darkness," cry they. "In the grave there is no light." And again, "Worms destroy memory."

Memory !

He shifts the tiny powder (that shines like a crushed diamond) from the paper that holds it, into a wine glass at his elbow. His dulled mind wanders from the present moment to another, when he had gained this powder from an Arab sheik, not by stratagem or intrigue, or for love of money, but through love of him—Crawford. *They had loved him, those poor proud souls over there.*

It had a special power, a special charm—this gift of the old Arab, who had adored Crawford, not only for service done (though Crawford had rescued his son from a disgraceful death), but because of a strong friendship for him, that had arisen at first sight and had grown with knowledge of him.

A little light, sparkling powder, but it could kill, without fear of after consequences. No one, when it had done its work, would know where the subtlety of it lay. No mark would betray its presence. The body would lie there cold and still, defiant of criticism. The sheik, who loved not his enemies—who was indeed always at war with them, and who would gladly have had the destroying of them at any moment—was desirous that Crawford should at all times be enabled to cry quits with *his !*

Raising a caraffe at his elbow, Crawford with a steady hand, pours some water upon the tiny crystals in the glass. A moment they bubble, foam upwards, and then die. Crawford, raising the glass, drains it. A moment later, *and he too, like those bubbles—perishes !*

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The servants, frightened, had burst open the door at last. They had found him in his usual position—his arms spread upon the table, his head lying on them. It was all so natural that their first impulse was to retreat again, and discuss the best means of gaining his pardon for their rash intrusion. Then the all-powerful silence of death filled them, and convinced them that their fears had not been groundless.

One of them went forward, and with shaking hands lifted his master ; one gaze into that pale countenance was enough. Crawford was indeed dead. The man settled him back in his chair, most carefully as if with a view to his comfort, and then—as if struck by the futility of his action—burst into tears.

Yes. He was dead. Gone past recall. He had closed his last account with life and from henceforth would owe no man anything, save the debt of kindly remembrance.

And many paid him that way. It was odd how great a number woke to the fact that he had been dear to them, when he

was beyond their power to tell him of their affection. He had been good to so many—so gentle to all. Was there one harsh word he had uttered since he came amongst them? If there was, no one could call it to mind. A sad man—depressed, and evidently a prey to melancholia—he had gone through their midst, with a helping hand outstretched, and a kindly word, or a conciliatory or a pleading word, for every body.

The poor missed him!

Consternation reigned in Fenton-by-Sea. Evelyn gave way to wild and almost hurtful grief. There was remorse at her heart, that burned, and gave her no rest. Oh! that last evening! when he had said good-bye. *Why* had she not kept him with her—instead of letting him go coldly, with just a frugal word here, an unloving smile there? She should have *known* that he was ill!

Heart disease! said the local doctor after an examination that seemed to puzzle him slightly. There was strange symptoms, so very unimportant that he was enabled to call the cause of death "Weak action of the heart," with a clear conscience. After all, no two men's constitution was the same, as no two men's noses were alike; and if there was some vague difference in this death from heart disease to those others known to him, why sciences of all kinds were now but in their birth, and thorough development and knowledge was for those years that should have forgotten *his* dead bones. So thought the doctor, and as he was a clever man, and a power in his way, so thought all Fenton-by-Sea.

The funeral was unusually large. All the county followed the dead body of Crawford. The exclusive county, who scarcely thought any one who had not been born and bred amongst them for generations worth a condescending nod. Devils might have laughed as they watched these sedate county folk marching in their carriages behind the carriage that contained the corpse of the murderer, the suicide—the carriage commonly known as a hearse. In his life crime had dishonoured him—in his death men showed him all honour.

He was lowered into his grave amidst a dead and impressive silence, broken towards the end by the sobs of some poor women to whom his bounties had meant life. He was gone! Their benefactor—their one hope—their earthly saviour. How were they to exist without him? Mr. Vaudrey, reading the burial service in a very uncertain tone, grew even more uncertain as these mournful sobs reached him. Alas! poor souls! How could he supply the place of the good man gone—the *rich* man gone?

Yet the rich good man in going had remembered. His will left much to the poor of Fenton-by-Sea.

He could not know that, then, and he read the service with a deep and honest grief at his heart—grief for Crawford, whom he had learned to love and rely upon for his beloved poor, and grief for his poor thus bereaved.

His voice quavered and shook as he went on.

"In sure and certain hope."

Beautiful words! But vain! Yet never had Mr. Vaudrey read this solemn service with so satisfactory a belief in the truth of it. As the black coffin was lowered into the grave, containing a secret blacker than itself, and holding it grimly for all time, no smallest revelation of that secret sways the air or blanches the faces of the mourners.

Earth gave the slayer—earth takes back. Within her bosom his dread crime will lie, unknown, until that awful day when the secrets of all men shall be revealed!

CHAPTER LIV.

EATON STAMER, leaving the churchyard directly after the funeral, takes his way to Firgrove and asks if Miss D'Arcy is at home.

"Yes, sir."

Can she see him?

"I'm not sure, sir," hesitating, and with an evident desire to help him if possible. "I'll ask her. Miss D'Arcy has seen no one, sir, since—since——"

"Yes, I know," says Stamer, rather depressed.

"But she's in the schoolroom, sir, and all the children are out. And I think it might cheer her up like if she could get talking to somebody."

"Well, I'll try," says Stamer, feeling rather cheered-up-like himself because of the cheerful maid's suggestion. He squeezes something gratefully into her palm and makes his way to the schoolroom.

"You aren't angry with me for coming, Evelyn?" says he hastily, as the slight figure in deep mourning rises from her chair to meet him.

"Oh, no," cried she, going quickly towards him, and with evident pleasure in her greeting. It is so evident, indeed, that something else occurs to him and damps his rising spirit.

"You aren't angry because I didn't come before, are you?" asks he anxiously.

"Not at all—not at all," says she, shaking her head to emphasize her assurance. "Only——. I have seen nobody but Marian and Mrs. Vaudrey, and——. Of course you were quite right not to come!"

This *naïve* statement he receives in a proper spirit. In truth, she looks so pale, so sad, and her lids are so suspiciously pink, that to argue with her would have been cruel—to explain herself to herself, brutal!

"That's what I thought!" says he gravely. He has taken her hand and pressed it. He is very duly impressed both by the occasion and her sorrowful face, but, through all, there is a latent jealousy about the deep mourning she is wearing. Gradually he grows conscious of his unworthy jealousy, and strives valiantly to get the better of it.

"Poor fellow!" says he in a low tone replete with forced feeling.

Long pause.

"You didn't like him," says Miss D'Arcy at last, not with so much reproach as conviction.

"I hardly know why you say that. I had few opportunities of improving his acquaintance, and, of course, I was therefore a little out of it, but Mr. Vaudrey told me a great deal. He was evidently full of charity. By-the-bye, Vaudrey and Bertram have gone back to the Grange with that lawyer fellow who came down to the funeral. Not a relation turned up, and his lawyer was anxious that some one should hear the will read. Though I can't see how it could concern Vaudrey or Bertram, unless, indeed, he left a legacy to Vaudrey to be used for the benefit of the poor of the parish."

"That would be very like him," says Evelyn in a low moved tone.

"Yes—ye-es—I think so," with an evident determination to be just to the dead, at all hazards. "I confess, Evelyn, I sometimes thought him a little queer in many ways—I used even to think that he had something to conceal—something to atone for—that he had committed some——" He comes to a full stop here, warned by her eyes.

"You were always unjust to him," says she sadly.

"I suppose so," meekly.

"You didn't understand him. That was it."

"Well, no—we didn't hit it off," meekly.

"You saw nothing out of the common in him, yet he was the most gentle, the most delicate—the best man on earth."

This is sweeping; Captain Stamer very naturally feels affronted.

"Well, you don't know them all, you know," says he.

"I knew him, at all events," says she with steady persistency. "And I don't believe, if there are any, that there are *many* like him. I don't think he had a fault."

She burst into tears. Truly, this affectionate respect he had aroused in her—of all living women—should have gone far to wash out the shameful stain that dyed the dead man's soul. And yet—had she but known all—how she would have loathed his memory! Yet Crawford, as she saw him, was estimable.

"You loved him," says Stamer in a subdued voice, touched by her grief.

"It is true. I did love him," says she courageously. "I was not in love with him as the phrase goes, but I was fonder of him than I knew myself, until——. He was the kindest, dearest man. Oh!" with a long, long sigh, "I have lost a friend, indeed!"

"Yes, I suppose so," vaguely. "I wonder who the heir will be—what sort of fellow, I mean."

"I never heard him speak of any of his people. I think he had no relations."

"Every man has relations, be the same more or less disreputable or otherwise. I daresay," idly, and glad to lead her thoughts abroad, "he'll turn up one of these days."

"Who? The heir? But why wasn't he at the—*there*—to-day?"

"In Kamtschatka probably, or at the North Pole—or trying to cheat winter in Cadelgo. One can't be sure, as we never heard of him, and you see it would greatly depend on whether his lungs were delicate, or whether his liver was in a satisfactory state. We know nothing, you see, as poor Crawford was hardly what one would call a babbler."

"No. He was very dignified!"

"Very secretive! That sort of person always is—I mean—er"—seeing he is treading on dangerous ground—"he never cared to say anything that was better left unsaid."

Miss D'Arcy regards him carefully for a moment.

"You are right," says she then. "He had great tact. He was never guilty of hurting the feelings of *any one*. But what has all this to do with his heir? He need not have been secretive, as you call it," reproachfully, "about him."

"Of course not," hastily. "The fact is, few fellows like talking about their successors."

"Yes, that's true. It is very natural—it is nothing to wonder at!" hastily, and as if decrying the thought that Crawford had been guilty of any petty feeling. "I wonder—who ever he is—if he will live at the Grange."

"Crawford has two or three places," says Stamer, regarding her intently. Is she sorry for the Grange; regretful of the sad fate that has killed her chance of being mistress of it?

"The new man may not care for so remote a place as this."

"No. It is a beautiful place however."

He turns to her.

"Are you thinking," says he directly, "that it might have been yours?"

She shrinks from him as though he had struck her, and the crimson blood flies to her face. She lays her hand on the back of the chair near her, as if seeking its support, but her lips and voice are steady as she answers him.

"I have been thinking that all day," says she calmly.

"But not with regret—as you imagine."

Stamer walks to the window and back again.

"Forgive me," says he, standing before her, and looking down into her offended eyes. "I should not have said that, I know! But—"

He pauses, walks over to the window again, and stands there, gazing with unseeing eyes upon the dismal winter landscape outside. Then he turns, and reaching the table nearest her, leans against it, staring at her with the frowning brows of perplexity.

"Evelyn!" says he at last, abruptly.

"Yes?" starting out of her listless attitude, to stare at him in turn.

"I'm going away to-morrow night—to rejoin my regiment in Dublin. I——. You remember the last time I went?"

"Yes," faintly.

"I can't go away like that again, Evelyn. You will think me selfish, unfeeling, almost indecent, but I *must* speak to you before I go. That last time—if I had spoken then——"

He grows silent, and the girl's face changes from red to white. Ah, if only he *had* spoken! What miserable hours might have been dropped out of her life! Her hands tighten their hold upon each other, her downcast eyes grow full of tears.

"That was a mistake," says the young man nervously. "I fear to repeat it. Let us have no more mistakes between us, you and I. I told myself yesterday that it would be a horrible thing to come to you to-day with a tale of love upon my lips, when that poor fellow——. But this morning I thought differently. I will risk nothing more. I feel superstitious about leaving you again without coming to some understanding with you—without telling you, although you know it so well already, that I love you."

He waits as if for an answer, but no word passed her lips; she has taken up the end of a black ribbon that catches up a fold of her gown on one side, and is drawing it idly through her nervous fingers.

"Will you marry me, Evelyn?" asks he in a low tone that trembles slightly. It is a proposal of the most formal kind, severe, uncompromising. With the shadow of the dead man still hovering over them it has seemed to him indecorous, impossible, to seek for actual happiness, to look for pleasure. To *secure* her! that is all. To leave her again, without a distinct engagement existing between them and binding them to each other, had been beyond him, but he is full of a stern determination to accept no delight from the situation.

He has not attempted to go near her. Respect for the dead man to whom she had promised herself unwillingly, in an evil hour, keeps back demonstration of every kind. But his eyes are fastened on her with so ardent and honestly fond a light in them, as should satisfy the heart of any woman.

"Yes. In a year!" says she, still without lifting her eyes.

"A *year*! My darling! what an eternity! Make it six months."

"Let it be a year," murmurs she tremulously.

"As you will, of course," says he, touched by the entreaty in her tone, and the tender meaning of her request. In the entreaty did there not lie true surrender? Let him not grudge that poor lost lover anything *she* now can do for him.

"Thank you!" says she simply. She raises her head; their eyes meet. Instinctively they lean towards each other, and their lips meet lightly, with a certain shrinking, and without passion. A sad little embrace, a mere ratification of the dear tie that at last binds them to each other.

"I am afraid you think me wanting in feeling," says Stamer

presently. "When I am gone it will give you an unpleasant memory of me. I suppose I should not have exacted a promise from you to-day of all days—when—. But I couldn't go away without being sure of you. You aren't," anxiously, "angry with me?"

"Not angry," she struggles with herself for a moment, and then looks up at him. "I'm glad," says she—"I'm glad you spoke. I too was frightened. Oh! if you had gone away again without a word, I should have died."

She makes a desperate fight with her weaker self, but grief, shock, joy—all are too much for her; she bursts into a storm of tears.

And Stamer!—alas for all his resolutions!—when he sees the very heart of him thus sobbing her little soul away, when he marks the pretty head, bowed through grief and weariness, and so many conflicting emotions; when he sees the slender brown hands trying to hide away the weeping eyes, he gives poor human nature way, and catching his little sweetheart in his arms, presses her to his breast with all the warmth of a passion virtuously kept under for so long.

"Don't cry! Don't—*don't*, Evelyn! There now! my love! my delight! Don't be bad to me."

He has taken out his own handkerchief, and is mopping her dolorous lids with a devotion—I was going to say worthily of a better cause, but what cause is so worthy as love?

"It isn't to you I'm bad!" says she with a great self-reproach, that doesn't prevent her however from clinging to him with both her arms; she is afraid perhaps that a stern sense of duty may require the abolition of this new beloved suitor, and by thus encircling him she feels that she can defy duty to touch him.

"No. You are too good to me," caressing the soft hair that lies just beneath his lips, and gathering up her hand and laying it upon his heart. "It is only that I can't bear to see you crying in the hour that at last—at last gives you to me. We do belong to each other now, don't we?"

"I don't know," sadly; "there is your mother! She—she will be angry about it, Eaton."

"Don't be unhappy about that. She is leaving Fenton."

"Leaving? For a time?"

"No—for ever. She may return of course now and then to delight us, but her reign at Parklands is over. You know that Bertram is going to marry Marian? I suppose," with a slight smile, "I ought to put it the other way round, but Bertram is so much to me."

"Yes; I heard. I was so pleased. Marian loves him, almost"—very sweetly but sadly—"as well as I love you. But perhaps Sir Bertram—he is staying here, at all events—and perhaps he may object to your marrying me. They want a fortune for you, you know."

"Nonsense! you don't know Bertram—nobody does, I think, except myself and Marian. He is delighted at the

thought that you and I are going to be married. I suppose"—he pauses and laughs a little, and then goes on—"I suppose you know that the *mater* wanted me to marry Marian, and——"

"Wanted Sir Bertram to marry nobody. Yes; I knew," says she, nodding her head. "But I thought at one time that you too, wanted to marry yourself to Marian."

"That was when you were the silliest person alive! *Now* you are the wisest—you have accepted *me*!" says he gaily. "Well, what I wanted to tell you was, that when my mother found Marian was engaged to Bertram, and not me, she surged, she uprose and finally declared that she would no longer undertake the care of Parklands. Whether this was meant, or a mere burst of disappointment, no one can tell. Bertram accepted it as it was. He is very quiet, but very capable, when occasion calls. He in fact accepted her resignation, and though she has made several attempts to rescind her first determination he has quietly ignored them. You see, you will be free from her. This"—says he smiling—"I put forward as a further inducement to you to be true to me."

"I don't want an inducement," says she earnestly.

"We shan't be very well off, Evelyn; you know that. You won't mind, will you?"

"I shall be the best-off woman in Europe," says she.

"Well, we shan't be worse off than the Robsons, at all events, and they seem to pull through decently enough. We are neither of us given up to expensive habits."

"I'm not," says she. "But you?"

"I've never had very much money," says he simply. "Six hundred a year from my maternal grandmother, not a penny beyond, except *once*, when Bertram was awfully good to me. But I took care I should never have to ask him again. It isn't fair. Every fellow lives up to his income, and a sudden call upon him puts him in a hole. I'll give up the army, Evelyn!"

"Oh! I couldn't bear you to do that," says she; "you would regret it so. It would be too great a sacrifice."

"With you as compensation? I think not," with a fond smile. "And there's that cottage of the Harcourts—not so bad a place and plenty of rooms—and if you can put up with it——"

"Oh! Eaton."

"Well, that's settled. Six hundred a year, poor as it is, will keep us alive, and I have interest, I may be able to manage something else. At all events," giving her a little loving shake, "*I'm* all right. I'll never want for anything, so long as I have *you*!"

At this moment a servant opening the door threw them into great confusion.

"Mrs. Vaudrey is in the drawing-room, miss. Her love, and may she see you *at once*. She said as 'ow it was very important."

Evelyn looks anxiously at Stamer.

"Oh! I can't go to the drawing-room," says she. "If any one else were to come in, I——"

"Of course. I'm off," says Stamer instantly. "Show Mrs. Vaudrey in here," to the servant.

There is a quick parting embrace, a promise to return in the morning, and springing lightly from the window to the turf outside, he disappears just as the servant ushers Mrs. Vaudrey into the schoolroom.

CHAPTER LV.

SUCH an excited Mrs. Vaudrey! With a bonnet very much over the left ear, and her hair anyhow! One lock has wandered into her eye, but she doesn't seem to heed it. The dolman has been buttoned wrongly all the way down, and leaves a generous droop of fringe at one side, with nothing at all to signify on the other. The hands she extends to Evelyn are innocent of gloves.

"Oh! my dear, have you heard—have you heard? Oh! my dear Evelyn! Give me a chair, my love, I have run all the way. Reginald told me—he heard the will read. I have positively *raced* here. And here's the letter," holding out a sealed envelope. "Reginald promised that lawyer man—his lawyer, you know—to let you have it at once; so as Reginald was called off as *usual* by old Betty Lampson at the most inconvenient moment, I said I'd bring it. The lawyer—his lawyer, you know—Mr. Johnson, would have brought it himself, but he had to catch the last train."

"But——" says Evelyn bewildered, holding the letter and staring at Mrs. Vaudrey, who indeed is worthy of all regard, taking her from one point of view.

"Yes, my dear, yes. The lawyer man would have come himself, and considering the importance of his mission, in my opinion he *should* have come, but it appears he had some tremendous case in town that necessitated his return. I don't wonder you're annoyed about it, but it seems he is to come down to see you first thing in the morning."

"But to see me for *what*? What has happened?" cries Evelyn, in despair of ever hearing the truth, and feeling horribly frightened. Can any fresh catastrophe have occurred?

"My dear, haven't I told you? Oh, my poor head! Reginald said I'd never be able to do it, and really *for once* I think he knew something. Oh! Evelyn. He has left you everything."

"He—Mr. Vaudrey? You mean—oh, no!" cries the girl shrinking.

"Yes. *Everything*! How he loved you! What deep devotion! He must have anticipated his death, I think. Poor, poor fellow! I daresay he knew his heart was all wrong. You are one of the richest heiresses in England, Evelyn!

Every penny beyond the few bequests goes to you, and there are three estates, and——"

"But it is impossible," says Evelyn, almost falling into the seat next her. "There must be some relations, some——"

"No one, it appears; at least no one specially near. He seems to have been singularly devoid of relations. Some of those old families die out like that. And everything was unentailed. I ought to congratulate you, Evelyn, but I can't my dear, I can't, when I think—— Oh! Evelyn, what do you think he has done for *us*? He has left me, *me*, £10,000. Oh! think of it—it is *riches*!"

Here the poor woman breaks down, and bursts into a passion of tears.

Evelyn, as if stunned, sits motionless. Then suddenly, as if the real meaning of it has at last entered into her, she goes over to Mrs. Vaudrey, and kneeling down beside her, lays her head against her shoulder.

"Poor, poor fellow!" sobs Mrs. Vaudrey. "Oh! my dear, what a godsend to us! And do you see how he thought it all out? It is to *me* he leaves it, in trust for the children. He loved Reginald—but he knew him too. He was well aware that if he left the money to Reginald it would all drift away, sooner or later, to the poor of the parish. He knew him and loved him, and was determined to make him comfortable in spite of himself."

"What a heart!" says Evelyn in a low tone. Her own tears are falling fast.

"Gold, gold, my dear! We none of us appreciated him half enough, though you and I, Evelyn, always saw the sweetness of his disposition. I thank God for that now. To remember that I had ever been unjust to him even in my thoughts would have broken my heart now."

"I was not unjust, but I might have been more loving."

"My dear, I really don't think you have anything to reproach yourself with. He was a different man from the day you accepted him. He was satisfied with you in every way. It is certain that you made his last days entirely happy. That he should leave *you* all he could, is reasonable enough, because we could see how he adored you; but that he should think of *us*!"

There is a long pause, during which the two women cry silently and give tender reverential thoughts to the dead man.

"It lifts us out of poverty," says Mrs. Vaudrey at length, in a low tone. "No one," with a touch of bitterness, "will be able to look down upon us *now*. I shall be able to get Reginald a new evening suit at once. There will be no sneers at him in future."

It is plain that the old sore is rankling still, but with it is a blessed sense of relief—of hitherto unknown prosperity.

Crawford when making this generous gift, hardly realized the intensity of the delight it would afford its recipients.

"He can give away his old waistcoats now if he will," goes on Mrs. Vaudrey, with restrained but unmistakable exultation, "I shall always be able to replace them. It is in my power from this day forth to keep decent clothes on his improvident back. It's a kind back, however, Evelyn, isn't it now?"

Good fortune has made her lenient, even to Reginald.

"It is indeed," says Evelyn gravely. Another time she might have smiled. Smiles are beyond her now. He has left her *all*! In life he had given his love—the very best of him; in death he had given her all that remained! And she? In word she had been true to him, in spirit—

"Something has been weighing on me ever since I heard it, Evelyn. It is that I can't *thank* him. If I could only *tell* him how I feel! How he has lifted one poor woman from perpetual worry to a sense of security."

The poor soul is more grateful for her £10,000 than many another has been for twenty times that sum.

"Yes, that is the terrible part of it. I have so much—so *much* to say to him," says Evelyn, who is sobbing violently by this time. "Oh! I ought not to take his money. He did not know, he *could* not! And I should have told him; I should have left it to himself whether——"

She stops abruptly. After all, it is impossible to explain to any one all that is in her heart. One small grain of comfort remains to her. She had been true to him. She had given up Eaton. She had been willing to sacrifice her whole life. Oh! if now he knows, he cannot be *very* angry with her!

"My dear, he knew that you were the woman he could really love," says Mrs. Vaudrey, who has providentially, and quite as might be expected of her, got on the wrong scent. "And as he *has* left his money to you, and as there are no direct heirs, I consider it would be a flying in the face of Providence to refuse what he was so anxious to give you. And would it be kind either? He is dead—poor, poor man!—and can make no protest. Is not that a reason why one should be the more careful to respect his last wishes? It would grieve him, Evelyn, if he could know that the good he meant to do you had been undone, and by you of all others."

"Yes, I suppose so. Oh! I hope I made him happy while he was here."

"No one who ever saw him with you could doubt that. What a gentle smile he had, Evelyn. I don't believe there was ever any one like him! So good to all—so charitable, so sympathetic!"

"He was a saint, I think," says Evelyn tremulously. "Oh! Mrs. Vaudrey, I can't forget that last evening he was here—the very evening he—he died! There was something in his face as he said good-bye to me—something as he looked back at me from the doorway—that goes to my heart now as I remember it. I feel I was cruel to him, that I should not have ~~let~~ him go. Perhaps—perhaps at that very moment he was

suffering ! His heart may have been distressing him, and I saw nothing—said nothing. I let him go—to his lonely death.”

There is a terrible self-reproach in her tone. She remembers how glad she had been to let him go. How she had longed for solitude to dwell on her lost happiness—to commune with herself. She had indeed forgotten all but self. *There* the sting lies !

“If I had called him back,” says she.

“My dear girl, you should not let such thoughts take hold of you. If he *had* come back, with the hand of the Lord thus heavy on him, how would it have been ? Why he—*it* might have occurred here, with you. Reginald says it would have been a shock too great for a child like you, and that therefore Heaven in its mercy averted it !” This seems to have been a good deal for the silent Reginald to have said. “Believe me, me, my dear, all is for the best.”

“It is unsatisfactory !” says Evelyn sorrowfully. “How can it be for the best when a good man like Mr. Crawford is suddenly cut off from life ? He was charitable, kind, loving ; he was no respecter of persons. The poor were as dear in his sight as the rich. I don’t believe he was ever guilty of an unkindly action. He was faultless !”

“A good thing to bear in mind of one who dies suddenly,” says Mrs. Vaudrey, with a curious but unmeant assumption of her husband’s manner. “Sudden death is always fearsome. But as for him ! he truly was ready to go before his Maker ! He had no sins upon his soul beyond the ordinary ones for which even the most righteous of us must plead guilty. Surely *he* is not suing for forgiveness vainly.”

CHAPTER LVI.

MRS. VAUDREY has torn herself away. Evelyn has run to Kitty, and with many tears, and many reproachful outbursts, told her of the news Mrs. Vaudrey has brought—and which the letter from Mr. Johnson has confirmed.

Having told her, Evelyn has rushed back to the school-room to finish her cry privately, leaving Kitty paralyzed and trying vainly to battle with the elation that is filling her kindly breast.

Evelyn, having regained her sanctuary, has flung herself into a chair ; she has carefully turned the key in the old lock, and with a long sigh tells herself that now at last she is secure from invasion—can think out her thoughts, and cry her utmost without fear of interruption.

One minute suffices to destroy this illusion. Captain Stammer had gone out by the window an hour ago ; he now comes in by it. He has cleared the window sill, and stands opposite to her, hatless, breathless, colourless.

The radiant lover of an hour ago is as sad a visaged man at this moment as the stoniest-hearted of us might grieve to see

"Is it true, Evelyn?" asks he, without preface. It is impossible to misunderstand him. Her own heart is so full of the subject that is troubling him that she answers him at once and to the point.

"Quite—*quite* true!" says she almost tragically.

"I would to heaven it wasn't," says the young man passionately. "Why couldn't he have left his money to hospitals, to homes, to Dr. Barnado—to *any one* but you? An hour ago I was the happiest man alive. Now! It changes everything. You are one of the richest girls in England, whilst I"—

"Whilst you are one of the poorest! No, no, Eaton, you cannot make yourself a girl, even to indulge your morbid grief;" she laughs rather uncertainly. It is a laugh very much akin to tears. "What is it that is the matter with you?" asks she, going up to him, and laying a gentle persuasive hand upon his arm, that sets his blood aflame, and is seized instantly, "Do you—can I—forget that this morning you asked in marriage the hand of the poorest girl in England?"

"Oh, as for that," says he miserably, "I wish we stood as we did this morning. You are no longer the old Evelyn, whom I——"

"Don't talk to me like that, Eaton," says she steadily, "unless you wish to break my heart. If you feel a change, it is you who have created it, not I. What has happened since this morning that should change anything between you and I? What has money got to do with us? This morning you would have married me when I was a beggar maid; am I a different girl now—because—Oh, Eaton! don't be unkind to me."

"I only mean to be kind," says he gloomily, still holding on, however, like grim death to the little hand. "It seems unfair to take advantage of——"

"Oh! if you go on talking to me like that, I shall die," says Miss D'Arcy, with a woeful shake of her head and an evident determination to be as good as her word. A sob escapes her; she makes a frantic effort to reach her pocket with her disengaged hand, but as that useful receptacle has been of late years carefully placed by the makers of gowns where no one can possibly get at it, she is constrained to give up the search for the handkerchief, and bury her face on Eaton's breast instead.

"Kind," cries she from this comfortable stronghold, "what do you call kind?" she speaks rather spasmodically, one quarter because she is crying, and the other three because Stainer, in spite of all his moody protests, has wound his arms so tightly round her that her lungs are justly resentful of this most unfair play.

"Darling heart! You know what I mean."

"I don't indeed, and I'm glad I don't. I never heard anything so cruel in all my life!" This *naïve* denial and acknowledgement both in the same breath goes without comment. "Oh! I've such a headache," cries she with instinctive

wisdom. "I've been crying all day ; if you make me cry any more I shall be ill. Eaton, say we are just the same to each other that we were when—you were here—an hour ago."

"Some day you'll reproach me."

"When that day comes, you can reproach me too ; so we shall be quits. *Say* we are engaged to each other."

"Well—yes," says he, trying to feel reluctant, but with a very madness of joy at his heart.

"Then why don't you kiss me?" says Miss D'Arcy sternly. He kisses her.

"You must read his lawyer's letter," says she ; "it proves he has no near relations—no one at all who could feel aggrieved. And I am sure he *wished* me to have—to be his heiress. There is only one distant cousin of his, a Mr. Warren, and he is an old bachelor, and enormously wealthy. Of course he might have left it to hospitals, as you said, but——" she pauses and looks earnestly at him. "We can do a great deal of good in this parish, can't we, Eaton?"

"Yes, darling," slowly and with a quick sigh. It seems hard to him that he should be enriched by Crawford ; yet to give her up would be harder still. Divining his thought, she comforts him by slipping an arm around his neck and pressing her soft cheek to his.

"Eaton," says she presently, a little shyly, yet a little maliciously too, and with a most natural sense of triumph, "your mother will not object to me *now* !"

"No," with a frown.

"Does she know?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She asked me if I was going down to see you, and desired to give you her love."

At this, after a struggle, they both laugh—in a subdued fashion truly, but until they shake again.

"Never mind," says Evelyn. "Give her mine in return. She is your mother and therefore sacred. And besides, you tell me she is going away."

"That is quite settled. Bertram, who is always so indolent, has been extraordinary firm about that."

"I am so glad Marian is to be happy at last. You knew—did you?—that she was always in love with him. Oh ! *that's* a secret—I shouldn't have said that?"

"And why not? Do you mean to say Mrs. Stamer, that you are going to begin by having secrets from your husband?"

Here they laugh again.

"Is Sir Bertram as happy as Marian?"

"Yes, I think so. I'm sure of it. You never saw a fellow so radiant. It has quite woke him up. But after all"—pressing her to his heart again—"he could never, *never* be a tenth part as happy as I am."

"Oh ! or as I !" rejoins she sweetly.

Eaton, reaching home, makes his way straight, not to his mother, but to the library, where he is sure to find Sir Bertram at this hour, and who receives both him and his good tidings with a most satisfactory warmth. Batty, who is present, joins in the general congratulations.

"So glad, old fellow. I always knew you *were* the man, even when the engagement with poor Crawford was on."

"Crawford wouldn't have suited her," says Sir Bertram. "Kind sort, don't you know, but—er—queer, don't you think?"

"He has been very generous," says Eaton gravely. "He must have been most honest in his affection for her."

"He was generous all through. You heard what he has done for the Vaudreys?"

"Yes."

"By Jove! a lift for them!" says Batty.

"I think Crawford was one of the strangest men I ever met," says Sir Bertram, flinging the end of his cigarette into the fire, after lighting a fresh one. "I don't think he was as old as he looked, and yet——"

"Heart disease ages people," says Eaton. "I daresay it was that that gave him that strained expression in the eyes."

"Look here," says Mr. Blount, leaning forward, and speaking with a touch of nervousness very foreign to his usual delightful self-possession. "I've had the oddest thought of late that ever——"

"My good fellow, tell us something fresh! We all know the sort of thought to be expected from you. Sanity is not your *strongest* point."

"Well, but, bar chaff! look here, you know," says Batty earnestly; "I've never spoken of it before to any one, but if either of you had seen his face that day—the day when Mrs. D'Arcy told him that Evelyn's name was Darling, and that her father had been murdered—you wouldn't have forgotten it in a hurry."

"Why so?"

"It was *horrid*, I can tell you! Like a devil! a tortured devil! It *haunts* me, by Jove!"

"Well, go on, can't you? You are evidently bursting to impart something better worth hearing than that. Crawford was never at any time a beauty."

"I can't get it out of my mind," says Batty, hesitating, and growing rather pale. "It has occurred to me that perhaps he knew something of that murder—that perhaps *he* was the murderer!"

"Oh! go the deuce!" says Sir Bertram, giving way to unkindly mirth.

"Bad advice, Bertram!" says Eaton, with suspicious gravity. "Better," turning to Batty, "go to bed, my good boy, and have your head shaved, for you are plainly on the verge of brain fever!"—THE END.

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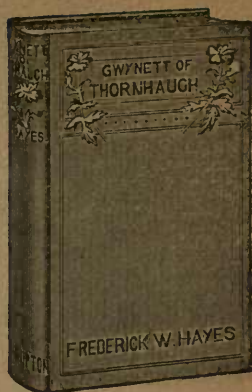
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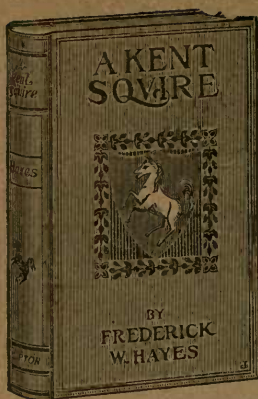
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